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"MY LOVE!"

BY

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AUTHOR OF "PATRICIA KEMBALL," "THE ATONEMENT OF LEAM DUNDAS,"
"UNDER WHICH LORD?" "THE REBEL OF THE FAMILY," ETC.



IN THREE VOLUMES
VOL. I.

London CHATTO AND WINDUS, PICCADILLY 1881

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TRINTED BY WILLIAM CLOWES AND SONS, LIMITED, LONDON AND BECCLES.

823 L658m 1881 V.1

Enscribed

TO MY DEAR OLD FRIEND

ANNIE HECTOR (Mrs. ALEXANDER.)



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"MY LOVE!"

CHAPTER I.

IN THE MORNING.

It was a foolish thing to do; but when was happy youth aught but foolish? And he was so happy! so happy! He could not find fitting vent for his joy, nor adequate expression by which to inform the world at large how great was his divine delight. Waking up to consciousness in the dawn of that sweet spring morning-full of blessed certainty and still more blessed anticipation—seeing neither rock nor shallow ahead and sure that no storm could come to wreck his well-freighted bark—young as the year, bright as the sky, hopeful as the day, he looked out on the fair English landscape of fruitful farm and sleeping village, of fragrant meadow and leafy wood; and for want of some one to whom he could say how VOL. I.

good and beautiful she was, and how his happiness seemed to fill earth and sky with radiance, he took off his diamond ring—her gift—and scrawled over the pane of the railway carriage: My Love! my Love!

What a boyish thing to do! But it relieved his mind somehow, and stood as the testimony of her worth and his passion, like the verses hung by Orlando on the trees, the name carved by Corydon on the bark. "My Love! my Love!" Ah, what a sweet Love she was! Never since the world began—never since Eve bent over her sleeping lord to awaken him to life and happiness with a kiss—had there been such a perfect woman as this! How true and faithful she was!—how loving and how pure! And how sure his happiness in this coming summer when he was to be made her husband as he was now her betrothed! How he loved her!—and how she loved him!

It was not vanity to say this; it was only trust in his word, confidence in her assurance.

"My Love! my Love!"

What man on all the earth had such a Love as he, Cyril Ponsonby, in Stella Branscombe!—the sweetest name and the sweetest girl to be found within the four seas. No king on his throne was so proud as this embryo civil ser-

vant who had passed his examination creditably and was now waiting for his Indian appointment; no miser counting his golden gains in his secret chamber was so rich as this only son of a ruined house, this young soldier of fortune whose inherited income was just one hundred and fifty pounds a year: -with potentialities of a noble sort in his youth, his strength and his brains—but for all that, potentialities as yet in the bud if not in the clouds. He whose future was all to make would not have changed places with the most successful man alive; and the grandest glory of the historic past faded before the glowing splendour of his present. He felt in himself something that was almost beyond the ordinary circumstance of a man-as if neither death nor evil fortune could touch him —as if he had conquered fate, distanced sorrow, and was now standing with the gods on the sublime heights of infinite bliss:—all because he loved sweet Stella Branscombe and she loved him.

"My Love! my Love! God bless her! and God make me worthy of her!" he said to himself, while his frank blue eyes grew dark and tender and his handsome face was touched with something more than even the deep love of a happy boy.

And with this prayer, which seemed to carry both his love and his joy to heaven there to be strengthened and purified, the train ground slowly up to Highwood Station and Cyril leaped lightly out. It was past five o'clock:—about four hours to wait before a visit to Rose Hill, where the Branscombes lived, was possible even for an engaged man to make. But to one impatient and in love, it is better to travel all night and wait those four hours on the right side of the line, than to go to bed like an ordinary mortal and come down by the morning mail—better a thousand times to lose a night's rest and undergo unnecessary fatigue than to forego two hours of love and gain six of repose!

Long before the house servants of Rose Hill had begun to stir, Cyril and the gardener were having an improving talk as to the prospects of the fruit crop and the general behaviour of the vegetables. Bruce, the big watch-dog, loosed for his morning run, was licking the young lover's hands and trying hard to take in his face as well. Jim, the groom, was telling him all about the pony and her foal, the new cob and the new mare, and how he did not quite like the set of his ears nor the way in which she carried her head; but when the first clatter of opening shutters began at the

house, the young fellow, half ashamed of his impatience, went off to the summer-house at the end of the lime-tree walk, whence he could see the upper windows and where he should hear the gong sound for breakfast. And then, sure of his welcome, he would be free to walk in on the family just as they had seated themselves at the table. Besides its convenience of position, this little summer-house was a sacred place to him; for it was here that he had told Stella he loved her and had asked her to be his wife, and it was here that she had said she loved him and would marry him if papa and mamma approved.

How long it was before he heard the blessed boom of that old bit of Chinese handicraft! Surely time never went so slowly as it was going now! Leadenfooted, do you say?—paralyzed and with no more feet than a snail!—that was what he seemed to Cyril counting the minutes as they dropped heavily into the great sea of eternity and making them all the slower by his own eager heat.

At last the appointed moment came. Mr. and Mrs. Branscombe were in the dining-room; Stella was running down the stairs; the omelette and the kidneys, the tea and the coffee, the toast and the marmalade, were fitly

disposed in proper form on the cloth; the solemn butler sounded the gong and told the neighbourhood within earshot that Mr. and Mrs. Branscombe were served; and then Cyril started up from his seat in the summer-house and walked swiftly up the lime-tree avenue, timing his entrance just as the first cup of coffee was handed to Mr. Branscombe and the business of the day had begun.

The young fellow was evidently a favourite in the family and one to whom a special length of rope was allowed. Not only was Stella radiant with glad surprise at his coming so long before he was expected—not only was gentle Mrs. Branscombe as frank and affectionate in her welcome as if he had been really the son he already called himself—but Mr. Branscombe, whose humour was the true weather-gauge at Rose Hill, smiled as complacently at the rest and did not look displeased at this interruption to his breakfast. Wherefore Jones, the butler, who, as a rule, resented domestic derangements and surprises as in some sense personal affronts, but who followed his master's line to a hair, smiled too as he ushered in Mr. Ponsonby and scanned each face of the family while seeming to see and notice nothing.

"Sit down, boy, sit down! What will you

take? Jones, a plate for Mr. Ponsonby," said Mr. Branscombe, as he gave Cyril two long, white, scented fingers, his manner deprecating unnecessary fuss.

On the hint of that manner both Mrs. Branscombe and Stella acted; each doing her best to look and speak as if it were the most natural thing in the world that Cyril should walk in from London to breakfast, when he was not expected before twelve at the earliest; and as if a girl's love and a mother's sympathy desired no warmer expression than a man's half-in-different welcome and more than tepid acquiescence in things as they stood.

On that hint too Cyril acted, with more instinctive than conscious perception of its importance. He sat down quietly enough at the other side of the table, facing Stella; for the present quite content with the joy of looking at her dear, dear face, meeting her glad, sweet eyes which seemed to say all that he most longed to hear, and listening to the sound of her voice which was like the most melodious music to his ears.

How beautiful she was! He had not seen her for a whole month; and in that month she had gained a world of additional loveliness and had put on a thousand new charms. Her rich

brown hair had even more red gold in its tint, more wave and ripple and straying rebellious little curls and feathery fringes in its lines; her large blue eyes, as deeply blue as sapphires and as soft as summer skies, were yet more beautiful form, more eloquent in expression—and surely that fringe of curling lashes was even longer than before and made them yet softer and more starry! Her complexion, so pure and clear, with that creamy softness in the shadows and that faint flush on her cheeks which made it so like a sweet wild-rose, was almost purer and clearer—as if happiness had improved her health as well as gladdened her heart; and her supple figure looked yet more graceful in the light-brown dress which clothed her like wax without a suggestion of millinery artifice. Her voice, that index of the nature, was fuller and sweeter and more musical than he had ever heard it-with always that faint echo of possible sadness in its music which showed that she had it in her to be a saint, a martyr, or a heroine, according to the run of circumstances and the ordering of life. Or, haply, she might be only a tender and loving woman whose pure history and blameless bearing would work like a charm in her own immediate world, giving a standard of excellency

by which to live and a measure of beauty that would be like inspiration to the rest. And Cyril meant that this should be her life. By God's help he would keep her as she was—pure and meek—from now to the day of her death; and make her happier than any woman had ever been made in this sad world before!

She was peerless; she was supreme. No other girl in England was equal to her, personally or morally, thought Cyril—his eyes fixed on her with as much worship as love, as much reverence as passion. All the same, between whiles he eat his toast and drank his coffee and made an heroic breakfast after the manner of healthy, hungry, happy youth, glad to live and rejoicing in his bodily well-being and his love alike.

And what a perfect mother for such a daughter Mrs. Branscombe was! How sweet and gentle, how calm and self-restrained! She seemed never to think of herself, but to live only for others; to care only to do her duty; to make those around her happy; to be just and merciful for her child; self-sacrificing in her home; attractive in the highest sense and in every direction. Her life was the very poetry of womanly tenderness; but it was a pity that her health was so delicate. She had

never been a robust woman and had always been one of that sensitive kind with whom the steel outwears the scabbard. Of late she had begun to look startlingly frail, though she did not complain, and Mr. Branscombe was too much absorbed in his own occupations, while Stella was too young to see all the length of the way that she had gone. Besides, daily familiarity with gradual change blinds the eyes which have not been opened by fear; but Cyril, pre-occupied though he was, was shocked by the increased pallor, the greater attenuation of that dear mother whose life was so infinitely beautiful and so infinitely precious!

Nevertheless she made no complaint; she never did; and when he anxiously asked her how she was? and was she quite well?—she smiled and answered quietly:

"Yes, dear, quite well, thank you. A little good for nothing at times. But the spring has been trying; and I always suffer in the east winds."

"I do not think you have suffered much this year, Matilda," said Mr. Branscombe with what in a less lovely man would have been a slight amount of peevish displeasure in his voice. "You have had nothing compared to my neuralgia."

"No, dear, indeed I have not," she answered with a sympathetic air. "You have been very bad at times, poor darling."

"At times? Always!" he said, almost as if she had flung a small affront into his fine face. "I give you my word, Cyril, I have not had one day this year free from the most atrocious pain. No man but myself would have borne what I have borne and not have lost both heart and patience."

"Poor papa!" said Stella, full of pity.

"My poor Frederick!" repeated Mrs. Branscombe, her voice and eyes also full of pity.

"I am very sorry to hear it, sir," said Cyril, as his contribution to the litany of condolence and compassion.

And yet how well and handsome and perfectly preserved and superbly got-up altogether this martyr to physical pain and mental depression was! Sixty last birthday—and no one would have given him more than thirty-five. How strange that his constant suffering had told so little on him!

"This is the kind of thing that tests the value of a man," said Mr. Branscombe, helping himself to a second plateful of omelette. "Pain, sleeplessness, nervous exhaustion, complete prostration, total loss of appetite—and yet the

spirit rising superior to all these miserable infirmities of the flesh—the blood of the gentleman asserting itself in trials which would have made the cart-horse-like boor lie down and how! I have never lost a day's work through it all, have I, Matilda?"

"No," said Mrs. Branscombe; "you have not, dear."

"I have gone on just as if I had been in rude health," he continued. "I have written and painted and composed without intermission. I have composed two-thirds of my operetta and I have written four thousand lines of my grand epic with not one single erasure—is there, Matilda?"

"No, dear, not one," said Mrs. Branscombe.

"No turning back and going over the ground again and again, like a stammering child learning to spell," he went on to say, tossing his handsome head and curling his thin lips in disdain for the poor literary clods who laboured where he enjoyed, plodded where he skimmed, corrected and re-wrote, reconsidered and erased, where he swept the air with one beat of his strong wing and completed in a day what others would have taken ten to create and another ten to perfect. "All right off, my boy—currente calamo, at one dash! That is the

way to work!—and that makes all the difference between mediocre talent and the higher reach of genius—between earth-born industry and the heavenly power of the divine afflatus. I will read it to you after breakfast, and play you some of the choicest morceaux in my operetta," he continued with a smile. He meant the offer for grace; and he expected it to be taken as he meant.

"That will be a great treat, I assure you," said Mrs. Branscombe, also smiling as she turned to Cyril; "but," to her husband, "suppose you keep it, dear, till after dinner? It will be so delightful then!—and Cyril may want to be out—or doing something else in the morning."

"Cyril has nothing surely of such importance on hand that he cannot hear my poem and operetta;" said Mr. Branscombe testily.

"No, sir. I assure you I shall be delighted to hear them. Thank you, dear Mrs. Branscombe, but of course I shall be charmed," said Cyril hastily.

Instinctively he desired to keep well with Stella's father; and Stella's father was decidedly touchy about his work; and very easily offended by the appearance of neglect. Though Cyril loved Mrs. Branscombe the better of the two, he would have had no hesitation in declining any offer that she might have made if not congenial to his humour; but Mr. Branscombe was different; and neither his son-in-law elect nor any one else dared to say "No" when he said "Yes." In his heart however, the lad wished the grand epic and the best morceaux at the deuce, and his elegant father-in-law with them. He had not seen Stella for a whole month; this was his first visit after his engagement and that successful examination on which the material security of his love rested; he had travelled all night and had been mooning about the place for hours at the risk of making himself ridiculous to the men, simply to get three hours' extra happiness thrown in; and now it was coolly proposed that he should take the cream of the morning, and devote, heaven knows how much time, to listening to an epic written without corrections —hundreds of lines at a sitting—and to the airs of an operetta dashed off without forethought and only by the grace of inspiration!

Fate however, was kind and spared him. After breakfast the divine afflatus came on Mr. Branscombe with such power that he was forced to defer his recitations until the evening, as his wife had suggested. He must seize the

inspired moment, he said, before the spiritual fire had burned down to the slag of everyday common-place. It would be a sin to the world -to the present and future alike-were he to let humanity lose what he had it in his power to bestow. Utterances such as his were not too frequent; and they were too valuable to be neglected. And to this Cyril naturally said "Yes, certainly," with fervour; and Stella and her mother said "Yes," too, with more simplicity of sincerity; and then the two lovers wandered away together, while Mrs. Branscombe went to her daily office of transcribing in a clear hand her husband's entangled hieroglyphics; -till forced to leave her work and take refuge in her own room, where only her maid knew the fatal secret of her life.

And now Cyril's turn had really come, and he was alone and undisturbed in the heaven of his love. He improved the occasion and took advantage of his freedom to tell Stella for the hundredth time how beautiful she was and how intensely he adored her; how divine a thing life was to him at this moment; and how he thought her condescension in loving him at all—he so far beneath her as he was in goodness and greatness of all kinds—the most wonderful part of the whole matter! He said a great deal

more; but this was the theme round which all the rest was merely a succession of variouslyphrased envelopes—ever the same thing under different verbal dresses. He loved her; she was something better than humanity; and his gratitude far equalled his glory in her love.

Ah! how sweet it was to say all this out on the lawn beneath that grand old spreading cedar! There they sat with instinctive modesty full in view of the house, but as much alone as if they had been indeed those primal two in Eden, taking with tremulous feet the first delicate and delicious steps along the enchanted pathway of love — that enchanted pathway which their posterity have trodden in the same way ever since. The birds were singing in the bushes, full-throated, rich, beseeching—here the chant of the conqueror, there the song of the wooer; the flowers were blooming in the garden, and bees and butterflies and flies with gauzy wings, "laden with light and colour," rifled the cups and poised above the petals; from every leaf and blade of grass-from every tender twig flushed with sap, like blood that blushes—from every opening bud still sheathed like dreaming youth in its soft sweet case of innocence—from the moss about the tree-roots and from the resinous bark about the stemspoured out the subtle scents of spring, calling up the vague hopes, the unspoken desires, the tender, dumb, self-unrevealed wishes of youth and the unfulfilled. The blue sky, flecked with cloudlets which but gave added beauty to its serenity and presaged no disaster, shone through the black boughs of the great tree beneath which the lovers sat and the water-fall at the back of the house added its endless music to the great diapason of nature which filled the air with the large glad symphony of life. was in the springtime of the year and the springtime of their love. The day was yet the morning and they were in the morning of their lives. No sorrow had touched them, no clouds loomed dark and threatening in their sky. Sunshine and music, perfume and love, were about them like a golden haze, seen through which everything was transformed to supernatural beauty, where was not one sordid spot for pain to strike or sorrow to root. It was the heaven on earth of the poet and the dreamer —that heaven which we all enter when we love and are beloved—when we trust and are assured. It was the glad dawning of that future day when they should live in unending glory, fed on divine manna and free from the pains and penalties which beset ordinary humanity—it VOL. I.

was the rosy-fingered dawn, heralding the great God of Life and Joy!

All this they felt as they sat beneath the horizontal branches of the great black spreading cedar-tree, while they spoke of their love and discussed their future; he, counting the days, and going into the arithmetic of the hours which lay between now and that blessed twenty-fifth of August when they were to be married; she, smiling when he laughed, glad when he exulted, hopeful because he was confident—always the woman's faithful following on the man's advancing feet—always her tender echo to his foregoing word.

How delightful it was to have him there! How happy she was!—and how delicious it was to be able to say to him that she was so happy, and to answer: "Yes, I do," when he asked her at least twenty times that morning: "Did she love him? Was she sure?—did she love him quite as much as he loved her? But no! That was impossible! No one who ever lived on the face of this earth—no one—no one—ever did or could love as much as he, Cyril Ponsonby, loved her, Stella Branscombe! It was impossible. Human nature could not go beyond itself!"

And he believed what he said; and she believed it because he said it.

Just then they heard the sound of a hard, dry, rasping cough. It was Mrs. Branscombe, in her own room with Jane Durnsford, her maid.

- "Poor mamma!" said Stella. "She has such a bad cough! It has clung to her all the winter and will not go."
- "She is looking very pale and thin. I do not think she can be well," said Cyril.
- "She says she is," Stella answered a little anxiously. "She never confesses to more than feeling rather languid."
- "She is so unselfish!" said Cyril. "As unselfish as you, Stella—my own beautiful Stella, my Star, my Love!"

And with this they wandered off again on that enchanted pathway traversing Eden; and even Stella forgot that her mother had a cough and looked pale and white, while listening to the rhapsodies of her lover.

CHAPTER II.

THE LITTLE RIFT.

The first thing that would strike any one admitted into the Branscombe household was its air of exquisite refinement and poetic serenity; the next would be the consciousness of some want somewhere—a very vague and indefinite kind of consciousness, and a want not to be found like cobwebs for the looking, but there all the same;—something in the atmosphere that would jar on the more sensitive and yet the most observant could not say what it was nor where it lay.

Cyril, too young and strong and far too much in love to be either sensitive or observant outside that love, had never troubled himself about things which he could neither touch nor demonstrate; and vague consciousness was a state of mind by no means natural to him. He saw all things with healthy positiveness, or he did not see them at all; and he had as little to do with shadowy suspicions as with ghosts. To his way of thinking Mr. Branscombe was all that an English gentleman of more mind than muscle, and of poetic feeling in excess of practicality, ought to be; and Mrs. Branscombe was the very ideal of a perfect wife, mother and gentle-The two together were absolutely perfect; and what Stella was to him we know. That vague sense of want, that fine thread of something not quite real, that faint echo of hollowness beneath the golden sands discovered by others did not exist for him; and he accepted the appearance of things with boyish good faith, wishing neither to lift up transforming veils nor to scratch off polished surfaces.

And indeed by the look of things, what a perfect household it was!—and how invidious as well as needless it was to imagine flaws where none were visible, or that the circle was not true when no one could find the exact point where the line ran flat! Moreover, with whom did the fault lie?—if indeed fault there were at all; which Cyril would have passionately denied had he been questioned. Most certainly not with Mrs. Branscombe, all but perfect as she was. With Stella? Ask if the moon gives darkness instead of light, if the sun breeds fog

and miasmatic vapours! No, certainly not with Stella; and if not with these two, then undoubtedly not with Mr. Branscombe.

The kind of man of whom the women of his family are at once so proud and so much afraid -to whom they give up their lives and think themselves happy as well as honoured in the sacrifice—whose will is as a Divine command and whose opinions on all matters carry with them the authority of righteousness and the weight of perfected knowledge—to serve whom is to carry incense to the altar, and to fail whom is to be guilty of irreligion;—Mr. Branscombe was the high priest of his household; a kind of domestic Apollo, representing the last word of refinement and the supreme result of culture. He was eminently a Superior Person who had to be petted and taken care of, flattered, caressed, given way to, and surrounded by the adulation of love at once submissive and protecting. He was never to be crossed in his moods, nor interrupted, nor told unpleasant news, nor consulted in cases of difficulty, nor made free of any form of truth which would be likely to jar on a nature so finely organized and full of exquisite susceptibilities as his. He was to be obeyed at a hint; his desires were to be divined and fulfilled without the trouble of interpretation; and his comfort was to be attended to without hitch or worry. And then he was to be allowed to think that he drove the whole team and was eminently master in his own house. And when, as he often did, he complained of the distressing amount that he had to do and the weight of responsibility laid on his shoulders, his wife did not laugh nor did his daughter remonstrate in favour of the mother who pulled the labouring oar while he flourished the flag—the one accepting for love and deliberate decision what the other received in faith.

Mr. Branscombe was still an exceedingly handsome man, as he had ever been. When he was in the Guards, and before he married, he was known as Handsome Fred Branscombe by his friends—Finery Fred by his enemies; and the conscious airs and little affectations of a beauty-man still clung to him. He spent a good deal of his time in devising becoming studio dresses for himself, chiefly of velvet, with appropriate collars, bands and "birette;" his still luxuriant locks were marvellously black and his elegant moustache and beard—cut Vandyke-fashion—had defied the silver fingers of time with as much extraordinary pertinacity as had his curling raven tresses. His hands were

long, poetic, white and well preserved; and his rather rodent-like teeth, as well as his waist and feet, were marvels of care and get-up.

Besides his beauty which he still cherished; his toilette to which he sacrificed as much time and thought as if he had been a pretty woman on the wane; his reputation as a lady-killer, which he never forgot, he was, as he had always been, a kind of dandy in art—playing a little on the piano, painting not a little in oils, writing poetry of an ambitious kind as well as vers de société for ladies' albums, setting charades and one-act plays for drawing-room entertainments, and the like. Rather late in life, namely at forty years of age, he had married sweet-faced Matilda Jerningham -"that good Matilda," as he used to call her; with a certain lofty compassion for her intellectual inferiority which meant confession of his magnanimity in overlooking her deficiencies for the sake of her excellencies. And soon after his marriage he left the army and took up his abode at Rose Hill, near Highwood. Here he turned to Art, as he called his play, and founded his title to distinction on his dandyism of pursuit as well as of person. He undertook as many things as if he had been the Admirable Crichton himself. Without more than the merest smattering of musical knowledge, ignorant of the first principles of thoroughbass and the law of harmony, he composed rondos and sonatas, motifs and nocturnes—and of late he had begun an opera, score and libretto both, which he called his Magnum Opus. did not know an Alexandrian from an hexameter, nor an iambic from a trochee, but he dashed off odes and sonatas by the dozen and lately he had plunged into an epic with an airy grace which poets of long practice in the art of rhyme and rhythm might have envied. And though he could not draw a round thing to look solid, nor an upright thing in stable equilibrium, he painted pictures of all genres, and attacked a portrait as confidently as a landscape, a cattle-piece, the heroic imaginativeness of high art or the accurate delineations of still life. His pictures were magnificently framed and hung in the various dwelling-rooms according to what he called the harmony of associated ideas. They made professional artists turn hot and cold by turns when invited to discuss them on their merits; while even the technically ignorant, who had eyes and no knowledge, laughed in their sleeves at the anatomy of the living things and the drawing of the inanimate

All the same his wife praised and encouraged him: and no one knew whether she believed in him sincerely or only flattered him because of the sweet policy of love. And naturally Stella followed her mother's lead. Born and educated in the worship of her father as a Superior Person, she went on worshipping him and believing in him now, just as she used when a child; holding him, as she had been taught to hold him, as the one transcendent man of all creation, the ne plus ultra of English gentlehood and cultured civilization. He was to her the impersonation of Matthew Arnold's "sweetness and light;" and when she thought of the illustrious dead each seemed to her in some sort a phase of dear papa—that microcosmic and œcumenical genius who contained all forms of beauty and goodness within himself and radiated on every side, where others shine only on one.

He, on his part, received all this loving adulation as a king might receive the tribute of his vassals. Their worship of the highest in him honoured these women who paid it even more than it honoured him to whom it was paid. It was the recognition of superiority, he said; and their power of recognition proved their own worth. The clod does not worship the glow-worm, but man adores the sun. It

was his due and their duty; and the two principles were as harmonious as a musical chord. He was fond of both wife and daughter, and rested on the one far more than the other knew. That good Matilda of his was everything to him —eyes and hands and feet and brains—mother, wife, lover, audience and applause, all in one. She followed his humours, bent herself to his shape, interpreted his wishes and guided while she obeyed. She guarded him from every unpleasant accident of domestic life, yet gave in to his fancy of holding himself as the pivot round which the whole thing revolved. She loved him: or rather she had loved him when she had married him full of enthusiasm for his genius, of admiration for his beauty, of gratitude for his love, of a girl's romantic belief in his infinite superiority. Whether she woke from her dream and found something in the weary life of reality which she had not suspected in the ideality of love, or whether she went on in her happy blindness, she never told. All that the world, Stella and her handsome husband himself saw, was a devotion that had no limits, an expressed admiration that was without stint, and a supple self-effacement that made some women angry, others jealous and a few contemptuous of her slavishness.

They had been married two years before the birth of their child came as an interruption—or addition—to their happiness. It was an even chance which it would be. Happily it was the Mr. Branscombe was rejoiced to be a father. It completed the circle, he said; and he talked hazily about Plato's triangle and the divinity of childhood. It gave him occasion for a picture of his Household Star—the baby in its nightgown—for a canzonet and a birthday ode, a lullaby and a nocturne; and he glorified himself in that pink little bundle sucking its fist in the cradle upstairs as if he were Jove and this the infant Minerva, or as if he were the first man to whom had been born a child. He gave the name—Stella. She was the Star of the House and the word went well in poetry. He had hesitated long between May and Iris—the one for her month, the other a messenger from heaven; he had tried Violet and Rose, Daisy and Eglantine; he had thought of Mary for sweetness, of Margaret for dignity; and he had gone through all the heroines of fiction and history. But none composed so well as Stella; and the Star therefore she remained.

He could scarcely have found a name more appropriate. As time went on and her character developed, the girl proved more and more her right to be named as something bright and pure and high and heavenly. She had not a fault; or if any at all it was that she had none. She was almost too good, too self-sacrificing, too high-minded. She wanted the relieving shadows of a silly weakness here, a wilful naughtiness there. She was just a little angel, said all her nurses, all her teachers; and gave no trouble to any one. Yet she was not sickly. She had sound nerves, a full chest, a healthy appetite; she could ride without fear, play lawn-tennis to perfection, and row as if she had been born with an oar in each hand. She was without morbid fancies or unwholesome superstitions and was just a loving, devoted, conscientious and unselfish little girl, with the possibilities in her of martyrdom should the occasion occur. She would have loved her heathen lover better than her life, but she would have preferred, to his love with apostacy, death and bearing faithful witness to the truth. She was a girl whom the most impassioned man could have loved wholly, without understanding more than her sweetness, seeing more than her beauty; and she was one whom a sage would have honoured and a priest would have dedicated.

Such as she was, she was Cyril Ponsonby's

Adored; and he was never weary of congratulating himself on his marvellous good fortune, nor quite able to understand why she should have honoured him—she who might have married a duke had she liked—and he, who was comparatively a mere nobody, with only one hundred and fifty pounds a year of private fortune and nothing more certain than brains, energy, youth and the future for the rest!

Though by no means a brilliant marriage in a worldly sense, this union of their only daughter with young Cyril Ponsonby had met with no opposition from the parents. It was suitable in point of age and birth and they could afford a dowry which would ensure the barring out of that cruel wolf whose black muzzle so often thrusts itself within the house when the door has but slender golden fastenings. The lad was well-built, healthy, generous, strong, and handsome in a fine, manly way more suggestive of field-sports than lady-killing. The two young creatures loved each other; what more was wanted than what they had? He was not rich certainly, but his family was good and his name was without stain; and with his prospects and her dowry there was no cause for fear. It would be a sorrow to part with Stella, of course; but girls are made to be married and taken out of the home; and they, the parents, always had each other.

"While you live, my good Matilda, I shall never want a companion," said Mr. Branscombe, when the thing was talked of between them.

"No; while I live you will always have some one to attend on you and take care of you," she answered tenderly.

But nothing was said of her, the mother, nor where she was to look for consolation. In her love and her duties, of course, Mr. Branscombe would have said, had he been asked. was the final cause of that good Matilda's existence but to give without question of receiving? What is the glory of woman but to love, to bless and to bestow? Had he not said so in that sonnet which he had addressed to "My Wife?"—that sonnet wherein he had compared her to Ceres; to Juno; to Saint Barbara with all the little children gathered round her feet beneath her cloak; to the moth, which lays its eggs and dies; to the grass which feeds the lambs; to the oak which man immortalizes in a temple, a mansion, a ship; to the coal which is burned for the benefit of a hero or a poet. That good Matilda was born to set forth the beauty of self-effacement and

the holiness of self-sacrifice; and he was not the one to interfere with natural arrangements and throw the machinery of Providence out of gear by ministering to that which had been predestined to minister to him.

And she, whatever she might feel, said nothing by way of regret—not even to Stella herself—but rather did her best to hasten on the marriage as much as it was seemly to do; she and faithful Jane Durnsford, her maid, alone knowing why.

So there the whole thing stood on velvet, as sporting men say. There was not a hitch, not a cross, not a cloud; and the lute of life and love gave forth its fullest and most melodious music.

It was now May, and in August the two were to be married. Three months which love ran into days as they passed and longing lengthened into years as they were looked at—three months of blissful anticipation, of joyous realities—and then the fulfilment of their dearest dreams.

Meanwhile, the young lovers sat on the lawn beneath the spreading cedar-tree, while Mrs. Branscombe and her maid discussed the secret that was between them, and Mr. Branscombe, in his study below, dashed off at white-heat verses which would not scan, rhymes which were not harmonic, and thoughts which were so much intellectual chaff without a grain of wheat to give sustenance or support. But he was satisfied with his work, dear man!—and presently, getting impatient by her absence, he called that good Matilda to listen to what he had done, and be, as so often before, his audience and his applause.

When dinner was over and the family had assembled in the drawing-room, then the famous epic was produced and read to its author's running commentary of interpolation—his designation of the fine image here, the sonorous music there—the cadence of this line, the ingenious rhyme of that.

"Then black-browed night arose, With her veil of stars and snows."

"That is fine, Matilda, is it not? You see the image, Cyril? The stars spangling the veil of night—that veil the snow-topped mountains. Perhaps it will not bear the coarse touch of prose," said Mr. Branscombe with a little hesitation; "but in poetry, which is so much more vague and suggestive, it comes grandly."

"Yes, dear," said Mrs. Branscombe.

"I think it lovely, papa," said Stella, whose faculty did not lie in criticism.

"It is a very fine image, sir," said Cyril, who had not heard very clearly.

And when Mr. Branscombe had thus gathered in his little harvest, he smiled, raised the delicate white hand which had been drooping gracefully from the wrist over the arm of his chair, ran his fingers through his curled and scented hair, smoothed with the tips of his fingers his irreproachable shirt-front, and then went on with his reading as before.

Suddenly, Mrs. Branscombe gave a deep sigh and turned deadly pale. A shudder ran over her; her hands dropped nervelessly in her lap; her eyes closed; her breath came in short gasps; and she fell backward in her chair in a strange and sudden faint.

All was tumult and confusion, tears, distress and terror; but when Jane Durnsford came on the summons, she seemed strangely collected and as if she had gone through the whole thing before. She knew exactly what to do; and she did it; and when Mr. Branscombe, whose helpless distress was almost as pitiable as his wife's condition, said half peevishly: "Have you ever seen your mistress like this before, Durnsford?" she answered with a sudden flash in her eyes which no one could exactly read: "Yes, sir, many times. It

has only been a wonder to me that no one but myself knew."

- "Send for the doctor at once!—send for Dr. Quigley, instantly!" cried Mr. Branscombe in extreme agitation. "Do you mean to say, Durnsford, that your mistress is chronically out of health, and I do not know it? Where are those men? Send for Quigley! Cyril, my boy, do you go for him! Heavens! that I should have been deceived to this frightful extent!"
- "It is of no use sending for Dr. Quigley, sir," said Jane Durnsford. "I know what to do as well as he can tell me. Indeed, he did tell me."
- "Oh, Durnsford, has mamma consulted Dr. Quigley, and we never knew!" said Stella. who was kneeling by her mother's side chafing her hands.
 - "Yes, miss," answered the maid.
- "But what is it? What is it?" repeated Mr. Branscombe.
- "Heart, sir. She has what the doctor calls aneurism of the heart, and may die at any moment. But she has not gone this time, poor dear!" added Jane, as a slight sigh stirred the lips of the fainting woman and a tinge of colour stole back into her waxen face.

CHAPTER III.

ANTICIPATIONS.

No; she had not gone this time; and on her recovery, that good Matilda—who was so much better than her husband knew-made light of her attack; said it was nothing, and that they were not to be alarmed. She half rebuked Jane Durnsford for her imprudent admission; but she was forced to confess that the doctor had certainly told her something was a little wrong with her heart, and that she might die suddenly if she over-excited herself, lifted a heavy weight, ran up stairs, got into a violent rage, or did any other childish folly not very likely to be done by a sedate woman of her age, she added, with one of her sweet smiles which were more pathetic than tears. They were not to fret or worry about her, she said. Creaking wheels last a long while, and she should live to look after them all and see that they got into no mischief for many years to come! They were to forget this little alarm, and not allow it to sadden them.

And with this she drew Stella to her bosom and gave her hand to Cyril.

"If only I might see you both happy!" she said tenderly. "I wish that August was nearer!" she added with a smile checked by a sigh.

"My poor wife!" said Mr. Branscombe. "I must read you no more of my poetry. It evidently stirs you too much. If I had known of your state I would have spared you the excitement—delightful as it is to me as an artist to see how you are moved."

"I can always hear your work, dear," answered Mrs. Branscombe quietly. "I should be sorry to lose the pleasure of knowing what you do."

"Yes; it would be a privation for you, my poor dear; but if it is bad for you?—I must take care of you and not do you harm!"

In this Mr. Branscombe was, for the moment, both considerate and sincere. He did really think that it was a dangerous experiment for this poor, weak heart to have to listen to his halting rhymes and foggy metaphors; and it was therefore a sacrifice of self to conscience, of

vanity to tenderness, when he said that he would give up his recitations because the mental emotions which they excited were hurtful to the health of his good Matilda. But Mrs. Branscombe, for all that she accepted her husband's words as they were meant for the moment, knew only too well the truth of things; and, meeting bravely what she knew would overtake her, she shook her head in pleasant deprecation as she answered:—

"Always well enough to hear you, dear."

"Ah!" he said smiling; "you are only a child after all, Matilda! Sweets—sweets—though they hurt you. Well, I must ménager for you, and not let you be excited beyond what you can bear."

And with this the matter dropped and the death, which had been so fatally near, faded into the background as a grim sentinel ever standing between the chamber and the sun, but not obtrusive nor making his presence distinctly felt.

The secret, hitherto kept with such care between the mistress and the maid, gradually leaked out; and soon the rumour crept through the neighbourhood that Mrs. Branscombe, of Rose Hill, was seriously ill and that her days were numbered. Exaggerations were added, as

of course; and she was credited with all the diseases possible between epilepsy and consumption. But the main fact was unfortunately true, and the world gradually came to the knowledge of that which had looked it in the face unrecognized so long.

"Poor, dear, sweet Mrs. Branscombe! How sorry I am! But if I were Stella I would throw aside everything else and marry out of hand at once." said Mrs. Latrobe, the handsome, fair-haired widow who had been obliged to return with her child to her old home, the Laurels, where she lived under the heavy-handed tute-lage of her mother, Mrs. Morshead—"that terrible old woman" as she was generally called; and with reason.

"I have not the smallest doubt but that you would, Augusta," said her mother sourly, in reply. "Between self-willed indulgence and duty there is very little question which you would choose."

This was a hit at that unfortunate past when Augusta had carried her point of marrying Professor Latrobe—a man much older than herself, who could make no settlements and whom she did not specially love, but whom, in default of a better chance, she accepted and went away with, simply to escape from her mother's

intolerable tyranny. Now that he had died and left her penniless, she thought herself bound by duty to return to the old bondage; and for the sake of her little son and his inheritance, she went back to the misery of her past, rendered harder to bear because of her temporary escape into peace, freedom and affection.

It was a horrible life. Mrs. Morshead treated her daughter as something between a servant and a child, and made her daily bread very bitter to her. No one but Augusta could have borne it; but then Augusta Latrobe had that rare quality in woman, absolute self-control and reasonableness. What she thought it wise to do, that she did in spite of everything, disinclination and pain included; and when it was necessary to submit to unpleasantnesses—well!—she submitted cheerfully and made the best of them.

"But, mother, she has a duty to Cyril Ponsonby too," Augusta said briskly; for with all her tact and sweetness of temper she held her own against her mother on occasions. She was not rolled quite flat, though she was made very smooth. "If that poor dear Mrs. Branscombe dies and Mr. Branscombe does not want Stella to marry and leave him—he is quite capable of it—what is Cyril to do? Give up

his wife and happiness for that selfish old fellow?"

"What else should he do? What else can Stella do but stay with her father?" retorted Mrs. Morshead. "What has become of all the filial duty and obedience of your modern daughters, I wonder? What ought a good girl to do but stay with her widowed father or mother? After all the trouble and anxiety that you have caused us from the hour of your birth up to the very last day of our lives, it is not much to ask that you should attend to us when we get old."

"In that case the world would come off but oddly," said Augusta. "Would you let only those girls marry where there are many in the family, and always keep one as a kind of nestegg at home? Would you never let only daughters marry?"

"I would at least have them marry men who could maintain them like ladies while they lived; and leave them a few pounds to keep them out of beggary when they died," said Mrs. Morshead fiercely. "I would not have them first disobey a mother and nearly break her heart by their undutifulness, and then come back on her with a family, as the only refuge against the workhouse. And none but such a foolish, weak,

old creature as I am would put up with it, so I tell you!"

"Now, mamma, don't be cross! You know you are much happier with me and Tony than you would be without us, and you only like to grumble. But I will not let you scold. It is bad for you, and you do not mean it."

As she said this Augusta rose from her place, giving her mother a nice little pat on her heavy old shoulders as she passed her, and went out of the room just a shade hastily. She was good-tempered and she was reasonable, but she had nerves and red blood like any other person; and she did not care that her patience should be over heavily taxed.

Others beside Augusta Latrobe said they wished that Stella Branscombe would get married now, at once; for every one seemed to feel that danger threatened her happiness should her mother die before that happiness had been secured. But though Mrs. Branscombe seriously proposed the shortening of the interval, and urged the hastening of the marriage by at least six weeks—and though naturally enough, Cyril was ready and Stella was not reluctant—yet Mr. Branscombe would not hear of it. He had not written his Epithalamium; his grand Wedding March, to be played in the church during

the service, which was to be choral, was not composed; and he was too much occupied with his epic to attend to either just yet. And with these important objections he overruled every suggestion offered, and opposed an immovable opposition to his wife's prayer. And when a man talks of his work as superior to human happiness, not much good is to be done, if he has the reins in his own hands and can drive the chariot of life at his pleasure.

It was in vain that Mrs. Branscombe tried all her old arts, hitherto so successful; in vain that she sought to guide him in the right way by tender flatteries, subtle suggestions. He yielded to none of them; and even showed signs of seeing through the veil which until now had been so impenetrable. To paint him to himself as grand, magnanimous, semi-divine, should he do this thing or that which it was his manifest duty to do, though generally efficacious enough as a rule, failed now. His pride was bound up with the production of this Epithalamium which was to be printed in silver letters on white vellum, tied up with silver cord, and distributed to all the guests. His heart was set on hearing his grand Wedding March played by a good organist—whom he would have down from London; and if the assembled hearers

should not have the good taste to tell him that he had equalled Mendelssohn, and perhaps surpassed him, his own knowledge would supply their deficiency, and he would pity their ignorance, not suspect his own shortcomings. It was too much to expect that he would give up all this intellectual splendour, all this artistic triumph, merely to satisfy the whim of his good Matilda and allow the two troublesome young creatures to be married sooner than was arranged. The twenty-fifth of August had been fixed as the auspicious day; and the twenty-fifth of August it should be; and his dear wife only lost her time in trying to bend his will. He was resolute, determined, positive. He owed it to himself, his genius, his fame and his child's glory to be firm in this matter; and what he owed to himself he generally paid in full. more need be said—no, not though she besought with insistence and strange agitation—tears in her eyes and her voice broken as one earnestly pleading for a grace that carried with it more than appeared in the words.

It was bad for her to excite herself, her husband reminded her with exasperating placidity—that placidity which means the very beatitude of obstinacy. She must be wiser than this; she must indeed! This was more like an hysterical

school-girl than his good Matilda who was generally so reasonable and easy to manage! And to break herself against the rock of his will, for a whim, was perfectly impracticable and impossible. How absurd! The idea was inadmissible; and she need not give herself any trouble about the matter. His mind was made up, and he could not possibly change it to entertain her proposition.

"My Epithalamium—my Wedding March—surely Matilda, you, who respect my genius, cannot advise me to abandon these two great works—these immortal monuments to our daughter's name!"

"I should be very, very sorry, as you know, dear," was her answer; "but they could come after, all the same, could they not?"

"And lose their point, their life, their meaning, their raison d'être? My good Matilda! how easy it is to see that you know nothing of the sacred fire, the divine afflatus! Ask a poet to forego the theme of his inspiration—ask a musician to allow those harmonious chords vibrating in his brain, to be for ever mute in the strings—and you ask him for what is dearer to him than life. Between the unnecessary hastening of this marriage by six weeks, and the perfection of any two ideas, there can be no

kind of hesitation; and I must say I am a little pained as well as surprised by your proposing what is practically artistic suicide!"

"But cannot you do them now, dear?" she asked. "You would have nearly six weeks from now if you would consent to the marriage at the beginning of July."

"How can I leave my epic to break new ground? My good Matilda, what an irrational scheme! The inspiration that is in me now might never return if once checked. Genius is not like a loaf of bread, my poor wife. You cannot cut your slice then lay it aside for today to find it serviceable in the cupboard when you want it to-morrow. You must catch the divine fire as it flows, or rather I should say as it burns. If I were to give up my epic it would remain for ever a fragment—a colossal fragment truly, but one that would fill the world with a sense of loss—that would be a sin against humanity at large, in that it had never been finished and perfected."

"Is it really impossible?" she asked again.
"With your facility could you not force yourself to return to the old strain?"

"No," he answered shortly. "What you are pleased to call my facility is in point of fact only the rush and swirl and outpour of genius.

I could not force myself to that which comes unbidden like the winds of the morning, the zephyr of the evening. And," he added peevishly, dropping his grand manner for colloquial terseness; "I shall not try;—so now you know."

With this the conversation ended. was no good in wounding her husband's vanity without result: and Mrs. Branscombe had always known when the next would be just the step too far, and how to hark back gracefully over a shaky bit of ground already traversed. Had not her whole life been passed in the exercise of this delicate discrimination? —this tact that was almost like second-sight? in removing sticks and straws out of his way, so that he should have smooth walking no matter whose feet were torn?—in making him happy and contented through his vanity, rather than suffering that vanity to lead him into follies abroad because wounded and neglected at home? It was only one among thousands of the examples with which her days were filled; yet this was the hardest of all. She would have given all that she possessed in life to have hastened this marriage and to have known that Stella's happiness was secure. But she was powerless when it came to a real collision of

wills between herself and her husband. When he ruled a negative her desire was nowhere; and what she could not win by management she could not obtain by force of decision.

"Your father will not consent, my darling," she said to her daughter when she came back from her sleeveless errand. "He has set his heart on his poem and the Wedding March; and it would pain him so much if he did not have them ready for the day! He says he cannot possibly do them before the twenty-fifth of August; and you know how much he holds by his work. We cannot say anything when he puts forth this plea."

Mrs. Branscombe said all this quite quietly and naturally; but she did not look at her daughter while she spoke. She found it difficult to uphold the claims of a bit of wordy jingle and ungrammatical music before those of human life and happiness.

"Dear papa! how good and kind he is to take so much trouble," said Stella simply. "I am so grateful to him, and I am sure they will be grand; but I wish that he could have got them done earlier. Not that I care about marrying sooner for myself, darling, but you seem to wish it so much, and so does poor Cyril; but, after all, perhaps papa knows best."

"He generally does," said Mrs. Branscombe. She had brought up her daughter in this faith and she upheld it even at this moment.

"And then, if you are not so well as you ought to be, I do not care to leave you a minute sooner than I must," continued Stella lovingly, putting her arms round her mother's neck. "It will be bad enough when it comes, though I do love Cyril so dearly—oh! you know that! But if I could have married and settled here in Highwood, quite close to you so that I could have seen you every day and all day long, how nice that would have been! How I wish I could, mother!"

"So do I, my darling," answered her mother. "But it is the law of life. We mothers have to give up our children—our sons to the world and our daughters to husbands. It cannot be helped! It is the price that we pay for the glory and delight of maternity."

"It is a dreadful pity, all the same," said Stella.

"Will you say that to Cyril, my pretty?" asked her mother playfully. "Or is it only to please the old mother?"

The girl laughed her denial, and kissed her mother's beating throat. How it beat! How hard and heavy and full and quick were those hammer-like throbs! Was this part of the terrible presage? She did not say what she thought, but she clung to her mother very tenderly as she answered:

"I love Cyril better than my life, mother; but he knows how much I love you and papa too; and he is such a dear, good boy!—he is not jealous."

"Who is not jealous?" asked Cyril, coming through the open window from the lawn.

"You," said Stella, smiling all over her face as if a sunbeam had crossed it.

"I have no cause," he answered. "If I had, I do not say what I would be. I do not think I should be generous enough to divide your affections, even if you wished it. But I can not imagine that. What made you say that I was not jealous?"

There was just a dash of uneasiness in his voice; something that was not quite like Cyril's usual richness and roundness of confidence in himself and fortune.

"Jealous of papa and mamma," said Stella, again kissing her mother.

He drew a deeper breath.

"Oh! that's it, is it? Well, no, I am not likely to be jealous of them. That would be absurd and bad form too!"

"You have no reason to be," said Mrs. Branscombe quietly. "The child loves you as much as the most exacting lover in the world need desire. Never forget that, Cyril! She loves you with her whole heart and soul."

The mother spoke tremulously; and as she spoke the tears came for the second time to-day into her mild, patient eyes.

"Dearest mother! My own dear, darling mother!" said Stella fondly.

"She does not love me less for loving you so much," said Cyril also fondly; but why this sudden sadness? this under-current of pain? this strange sense of shadow in the cloudless sky? Ah! he forgot that she, this dear mother, was ill. It was her failing health that had touched her nerves and made her so much more sensitive than she used to be. "And whatever happens," he continued, meaning Stella's marriage and consequent departure from home; "she will always love you just as much as she does now. One love does not drive out another, and her heart is large enough to hold the two."

"You answer for me very confidently," said Stella forcing a laugh; and the mother also forced a laugh in concert, so that the sudden shadow passed and the under-current of pain was lost in the ripple of the smiling surface. And then Cyril and Stella went out into the garden, where they spent nine-tenths of their time, and once more found Paradise and security beneath the spreading branches of the old cedar on the lawn.

"If only Fred would have consented!" replied Mrs. Branscombe, looking after them sadly. "If I could but see her safe, and feel sure that she would not have to live as I have lived! Oh, that God would give me strength to carry me over these coming weeks, so that I may live till I have seen her safe!"

Would she? When Colonel Moneypenny asked Dr. Quigley as they came out of church the Sunday after the rumour of her malady crept about: "How he really thought Mrs. Branscombe was?" and: "Was it true that she was in a very bad way, and might reckon up the weeks she had to live on her fingers?" the doctor—who liked her and knew of her more than any one did in Highwood-looked more than professionally grave as he answered: "It is impossible to limit the recuperative power of nature; but if she does not get better soon we may prepare for her being much worse." And this from a man as cautious and cheery as Dr. Quigley was almost as bad as a sentence of death.

It was indeed doubtful if she would last over these three intervening months. That aneurism was certainly not decreasing, it was scarcely stationary; and she had a cough, which was about the worst thing that she could have in her present circumstances. It shook her to pieces, as Jane Durnsford said, and made her often feel as if this were indeed death. She was also evidently anxious about something, though no one could imagine what it was. There was nothing new in her life, save this marriage which she had sanctioned and desired with all her heart. So why should she be anxious? they asked one of another; and no one knew what to answer. No one knew the secret of her thoughts; not even Jane Durnsford, who had known that other secret so long. But every one felt that something was underneath the smooth appearance of things, and that sweet, patient, gentle Mrs. Branscombe that good Matilda—had some kind of unspoken trouble which did not tend to make her present precarious state of health more reassuring.

The first fear past, things gradually slipped back into their old groove. All was just as it had ever been; save that Stella hung about her mother more tenderly than before—anticipated her wishes with more of the prescience of love

—and, for all that she was in one sense absorbed by Cyril, seemed to live more and more in her mother's life; that Cyril was even more contented, more gentle, more loving and more considerate than he had ever been—and he had always been "such a dear boy to me," as she used to say; and that Mr. Branscombe prefaced his perpetual requirements with: "If you feel well enough, my good Matilda;"-" If it will not tire you too much, my poor wife "-will you come into my elegant studio and give me your time, vour mental energies, your attention, your very life's blood, by listening to the poorest trash that ever dribbled from a human brain, with the understanding that you are to applaud and find it all excellent and without fault?

The weight was laid on her as heavily as before; and what a terrible weight it was! Who that has not known can estimate the pain of this awakening from the loveliest dream of romance that ever gilded maiden fancy into the most meagre prose of reality by which wifely knowledge was disenchanted?—finding the man whom she had believed to be a genius nothing but a wind-bag; finding the nature which she had believed to be chivalrous and exalted, selfish, vain and mean; finding the man to be simply a mask; yet forced to live as if she still

believed in the depth of the shallowness so sorrowfully gauged; forced to pretend that she found his verses poetry, his music melody, his paintings art; forced to give her life in transcribing, and her strength in praising, things which were not worth the paper on which they were written! And she, naturally the soul of truth, to live with the oppressive knowledge of her own life-long deception and his substantial worthlessness, yet to be unable to tell the terrible secret to living being—to be almost afraid and ashamed to confess it to herself!

No wonder that her nerves and heart had given way under the strain; that nature had avenged herself on the strength by which she had been coerced!

This, then, was why Mrs. Branscombe yearned so ardently to live till she had seen Stella safely married. She knew what her own existence had been as the moral sacrifice, the intellectual victim, of her husband; and she feared that he would take her child as he had taken her, and make a second sacrifice when the first was exhausted. Should she, the mother, die before her daughter was safe under the protection of Cyril, she feared that the marriage would be broken off in order that Stella might be kept at home to be the companion of her father.

Unable to rise to the dignity of unselfishness, or to bear the ennui of his loss and loneliness, he would take the girl's happiness as the cushion for his own, and break her heart and Cyril's that he might have some one to whom to read his epic and play over his latest nocturne. And then Stella would find out the true nature of this idolized father of hers, whom now she believed flawless and touched with a spiritual grace beyond that of the common race of men.

All this was just what no one in the whole world suspected. The Branscombe marriage had always passed for one of the happiest which the mind of man could conceive or the heart of woman desire. Tastes, souls, characters, were all twins one with the other, according to the general belief of society; and had any one at Highwood been told that Mrs. Branscombe was literally dying of her husband's artistic elegance—dying of his odes and his canzonets, his operettas and his pictures—it would have been as if he had witnessed an ugly miracle whereby beauty had suddenly become foulness and truth had crumbled down into falsehood.

But it would not have been believed. Mrs. Branscombe had kept the secret too well to

give the smallest loophole of suspicion, save to Dr. Quigley—not even to poor Durnsford. She had married with the fullest faith in love and sentiment, and with the principle superadded of the strictest wifely duty. This wifely duty included in her mind absolute self-surrender and devotion. The wife of a criminal should stand by him in the dock; the wife of a sham should hide her knowledge of the mask and maintain the integrity of the thing represented only, not existing. Life-long deception for the maintenance of a husband's undeserved repute was a sorrow truly, but no sin-a strain, but no crime. A woman's conscience knew no higher virtue than conjugal devotion; and a mother's duty was involved in bandaging her children's eyes and bringing them up in blind worship of their paternal wind-bag. On this principle she had acted, in this practice lived; but the terrible tension told on her at last, and Dr. Quigley said to himself: "The wonder is, not that there is an urism of the heart, but that it did not develop earlier and that it has lasted so long!"

CHAPTER IV.

FULFILMENT.

Stella had two especial friends at Highwood, Augusta Latrobe and Hortensia Lyon. They were friends fulfilling very different functions and of a very unequal calibre one from the other. Mrs. Latrobe, though still young, had leaped the gulf which separates maidenhood from womanhood, and was therefore the denizen of an unknown country and so far somewhat of a stranger to her former playfellows; while Hortensia was a girl like Stella herself and stood on the same plane and platform.

For all that, Augusta was perhaps really the favourite; and Stella usually gave good heed to what the bright-tempered, fair-haired, reasonable widow said to her. She felt that Augusta spoke from a broader view of things, a wider horizon and a clearer knowledge of life. Had she not been married for six years, living out

of Highwood and in the heart of London society? Of course, then, she knew life better than a country girl who had never left home possibly could; and, as was said, for the most part Stella gave heed to her and respected her understanding.

But not this time! How indeed could she? When Augusta came up to Rose Hill and gravely proposed to the girl that she should marry Cyril Ponsonby—secretly, if need be, but at once—it nearly brought about a quarrel between the two, so great was the girl's horror and surprise at a proposition which seemed to her the very acme of indelicacy.

"Why should I marry, secretly and at once, when I am so soon to be Cyril's wife in the face of the world and without deceit?" she asked indignantly.

"There are many things which women can advise girls to do yet not be able to give all the reasons," was Augusta's tranquil answer. "If you were wise you would take my advice and act on it."

"But, Augusta, what would my father and mother say to such an extraordinary thing?" said Stella, opening her beautiful eyes to their widest. "What would Cyril himself think of it! He would be as shocked as I myself."

"Time would show," answered Augusta sententiously. "My advice is good, and I know what I am saying."

"You are generally not so mysterious," said Stella, trying to laugh the whole thing into vapour.

"You need not treat it lightly," returned her friend gravely. "I am mysterious if you like to say so; but I am awfully in earnest."

"Then give me some reason—tell me why," was Stella's rejoinder.

"Shall I? Are you sensible enough to hear the truth?"

"I think so," she said. "I care more for the truth, however unpleasant, than for pretty pretences."

"Well, then, listen. Suppose your mother dies. You know she is in bad health, and may; so why do you shrink and say 'Oh, Augusta!' as if I had said something monstrous and impossible? Well, suppose she dies, then your marriage will be delayed, heaven knows how long; and you never know what may happen when once these things are put off."

"It would be such a sorrow," said Stella, her eyes full of tears, "that I could easily give up my own happiness for a little while. I do not think I should care much for myself at all if

I lost her."

- "And Cyril?"
- "Cyril would feel with me, I am sure of that."
 - "And go to India without you?"
- "If necessary, yes; but it would not be necessary. I could be married quietly, without parade or fuss, even if such a dreadful thing had happened. But I cannot bear to discuss the probability, Augusta. It is too dreadful."
- "And if your father objected to the marriage?" continued Augusta, not heeding Stella's disclaimer.
 - "He would not."
- "In that case the argument goes for nothing; but if he did, would you give up Cyril?"
- "Augusta, how cruel you are to-day! How do I know what I would do?" said Stella, a certain look of terror breaking through the mournfulness on her face.
- "Oh, I see! you would give up Cyril," said Mrs. Latrobe tranquilly.
- "If papa wanted me to stay with him for a little while to comfort him, it would be my duty, even if I had to put off my marriage for a few months."
- "And if he wanted you to break off altogether? Are you prepared to make that sacrifice too, Stella?"

"He would not ask me," she answered. Mrs. Latrobe gave an odd kind of smile.

"You are just like all the rest," she said; "afraid of being pinned to a point. Well! remember that I counsel you to marry now, at once, without fuss and even secretly, if need be."

"And make my happiness out of my mother's chance of dying? Augusta! how dare you advise such a thing? It seems to me almost like murder—like killing her for my own advantage."

Augusta Latrobe slightly shrugged her shoulders. They were broad, finely-modelled, and as white and smooth as ivory beneath her dress.

"My dear," she said, "I have as much sentiment as any one need have, but I have flung overboard all superfluity. I find life a tight pattern at the best; and I think the wisest thing we can do is to make ourselves as comfortable as possible. Analyze what I have said, and what harm is there in it? Only a very necessary precaution against possible disappointment, like settlements against your husband's possible ill-conduct in money when you marry. You believe in Cyril; but you will have settlements all the same as if you had not a particle of trust in him. You put your happi-

ness into his hands, but you protect yourself by all the power of the law against his dishonour. So you believe in your father's unselfishness and your mother's immortality, but I for one think you would be wise to secure yourself against a possible disappointment in the one and sorrow from the other."

"You and I see things differently," said Stella. "I could not act in this way. It would be too cold-blooded!"

"Yes, that is just it. It would be rational; and reason always is cold-blooded," said Augusta.

"We need not be all reason—we must have a little sentiment—a little feeling," Stella returned.

"Ah, my dear! a very little is enough, I assure you. Reason carries the heaviest metal and goes the farthest, believe me. If you had the brains I always thought you had you would let me persuade you; and you would be Cyril Ponsonby's wife before the week was out."

"Now, do not let us talk of it any more," said Stella hastily. "I ought to be very angry with you, but I know that you mean well and have spoken for my good, and I cannot be vexed. But, indeed, dear Augusta, I

am pained. I did not think you would have said all this."

"You are a good little goose," said Augusta kindly. "I have said my say; discharged my conscience; so now we will let the matter drop. You value sentiment you see, and I go in for common sense. We will see which wins in the end. Now, take me into your conservatory like a love. I hear you have the most magnificent lapigeria in all Highwood, and my mother said I was to be sure and see it and ask your gardener how he has managed to cultivate such a beauty."

"You may ask, but he will not tell," said Stella, as lightly as she could speak. "Mason has his secrets of cultivation which he tells no one, not even us."

"What is his price?" said Augusta with unmoved placidity. "Every one has his or her price."

"Augusta, what an awful principle!" cried Stella.

"Truth always is awful, dear, to those who have not learned her lessons by heart. Then it becomes common-place and ceases to terrify," said Augusta; and with this the two went out into the garden on their way to the greenhouse, and Stella wondered if she should ever again

love her friend as much as she once did, or forget the painful impression made on her by to-day's talk.

And as they went into the greenhouse they fell upon Cyril in the full freedom of prospective sonship, smoking his cigar among the flowers—tobacco being good against the green fly and the red spider.

While looking at the flowers, Augusta managed to get a few paces apart with Cyril. Really she scarcely knew why she took all this trouble about these young people and their concerns! What could it matter to her whether they married now or not? Only she was goodnatured, and did not like to think that they would be made miserable. Still, half despising herself and half deprecating her own solicitude, she did what she could; so, bending over a fine petunia which she affected to praise and did not see, she said in a low voice to Stella's lover:

"Mr. Ponsonby, why don't you give up all the finery of your wedding, and get it over at once while Mrs. Branscombe is alive and well enough to go to it? Take my advice and marry the first day you can."

And before Cyril could answer, or had recovered from his astonishment, she had joined Stella over the lapigeria, and was lost in amazement at the size of the flowers and the brilliancy of their colouring.

But Cyril mentally said to himself: "What a thorough woman that is! What a goodhearted darling!" and felt a strange impulse of friendship to her as the one woman who had interested herself in his love and Stella's.

Once again the family was assembled in the drawing-room after dinner as before, to listen to more lines added to that interminable epic which grew and grew like a mushroom in the night, or like that fish in the Arabian tales which threatened to fill the world with its appalling immensity. The sacred fire burnt with terrible fervour at this moment and the divine afflatus was breathed out in a surprisingly shrill and prolonged note. And yet, the other side of contempt being pity, it was almost pathetic to see the intense satisfaction felt by the author of this hopeless stuff, and how sincerely assured he was both of his own genius and the world's illimitable gain in his works.

They were sitting now in the half-circle of established custom. Mr. Branscombe was at the outer edge in the stately, carved armchair which combined ease with dignity and had the air of a drawing-room throne. His right hand fell over the lion's head that formed the finish

of the arm; his left held the precious manuscript. His scented locks, black and glossy with crafty pomades warranted not to dye, only to preserve, were artfully disposed in wellarranged layers to hide the tell-tale thinning tracts; his pointed beard and well-arranged moustache were treated with the same care as his hair; his evening dress was of faultless elegance, save perhaps for more jewellery than was permissible by the strictest canons of taste. but the gold of his heavy florid chain combined well with that narrow line of purple-blue beneath his waistcoat which suggested a riband of merit modestly hidden; his handsome face. with its thin, high, razor-edged nose, loosely curved mobile lips, fine eyes and clear transparent skin, was as sensitive as it was conscious; he looked the ideal of a former Beauty-man turned poet and artist in his latter maturity— Adonis aging into a gentleman-like Jupiter-Alcibiades developing into Plato.

His wife sat next him, in a smaller, less stately, less throne-like chair. His sense of fitness was so keen that he would have thought it a want of delicacy on her part, a something that savoured of strong-mindedness and conjugal rebellion, had she taken for her seat a chair resembling his. She might be queen where he

was king, but she was queen in a minor degree, standing always on the step below his throne.

Cyril and Stella sat on the sofa, half facing these two, leaving room for a Florentine marble table by Mr. Branscombe's side, where he could place his sheets as he finished them, or refresh himself with eau sucrée à fleur d'orange—a beverage which greatly pleased him, and which he recommended to all his friends as a discovery made by himself alone.

So the time passed. At every four or five lines Mr. Branscombe interrupted his reading, which was of the sonorous and artificial kind, that he might appeal to his good Matilda for praise and confirmation.

"That is a fine example of alliteration, is it not, Matilda?" he said, as he broke off in the middle of a sentence to call her attention to the epithet, "leafy-fingered Flora, flooding fields with summer sowing." "I flatter myself this has the true Shakespearian ring," he said again by way of commentary, when he had half sung, half chanted, these lines:

[&]quot;Can honour dwell in thick-skinned caitiff breasts?

Or pure refinement where gross usage reigns?"

[&]quot;Has Keats ever produced an image more purely Greek and sensuous than this?" was his

next interruption when he came to a Hymn of Maidens, sung in strophe and antistrophe to celebrate the victory of their fellow-countrymen—which victory he described as the dashing of young eagles against the storm-clouds in a murky sky, while the maids themselves were white doves fluttering in the sunshine. How the dashing of young eagles against the storm-clouds could do any good by way of dispersion he omitted to state. Such poetry as his does not concern itself with the facts of natural history; and versified meterology is notoriously free from fetters.

It was these interruptions and perpetual appeals to attention—these incessant bids for admiration—which made the torture of these readings to Mrs. Branscombe. Had her husband been content to read on and on, as some men do, needing no more than the mere appearance of attention, with sometimes a word of praise judiciously interjected when a pause naturally came and it was only common politeness to fill it, she could have borne it bravely. She could have thought out her own thoughts, and been no more disturbed by the monotony of her husband's voice than by the sough of the wind among the trees or the falling of the cascade behind the house. But this perpetual demand,

this ceaseless strain, made the whole thing a fatiguing exercise, and one which exhausted her even more than bodily exertion. And it was one which habit and custom, instead of softening, rendered only the more difficult.

Cyril and Stella were not thus appealed to, and therefore had nothing to bear. They made the dumb audience of whose sympathies the poet was sure; but that good Matilda was the chorus whose voice must be heard and whose minor action must run along the line taken by the actors. Those two silly young people might listen or not, as they choose, for all the attention paid to them by Mr. Branscombe. So long as they behaved themselves with outward decorum, did not giggle nor whisper nor shuffle with their feet nor make any kind of stir or noise, they might talk together by eyes and little gestures, by happy smiles and mutual understanding, all in the foolish way of lovers, and earn no rebuke for unbecoming conduct. And as they did thus occupy themselves each would have been hard put to it to say distinctly what all this monotonous recitation was about: though Stella thought that papa looked very elegant and handsome and superior-that his white hands were as beautiful as a woman's that his face was the most graceful and gentlemanlike imaginable—and that the whole thing, from the well-arranged curl on his forehead to the small, slim foot in blue silk socks and patent-leather shoes with broad ribbon bows, resting in a picturesque attitude on the crimson velvet footstool, was of the highest order of art that could be seen.

Perhaps Cyril would have preferred a general conversation; or better still, that happy garden where he found his own Paradise and made his Love's; and Stella would have followed his lead had he been able to give it. But of course this was all naughtiness, and had to be suppressed even from each other. It was her father who was boring him and to whom she herself was giving only a fragmentary attention—listening with her ears but not with her heart; and her father was almost as sacred to Cyril as to Stella herself.

The three listeners were wonderfully quiet; and by a strange chance Mr. Branscombe had forgotten to interrupt himself or stir up them for the last run of twenty minutes. The evening was sweet and still; the light was gradually waning. Booming beetles and ghostly millermoths flew past the open window across the fragrant lawn; bats darted in slender lines of sudden darkness against the sky; the owls

began to hoot in the woods; the last notes of the birds came in fitful signals sleepily from among the trees; a nightingale was giving out his song; the stars were just beginning to shine in the darkening blue where the crescent moon showed her silver streak; and the voice reciting that interminable epic became more and more monotonous in its artificial strain, more and more conducive to slumber, like the rustling of the wind in a corn-field, or the falling plash of water; when suddenly Mr. Branscombe interrupted himself with a short, sharp jerk.

"Why, Matilda, I do believe you are asleep!" he cried angrily, in a shrill, high-pitched voice.

"No, dear! no, I am not!" she answered, starting and raising herself. "No, I am not," she said again, with a strange expression of terror and disturbance on her face.

She sat up in her chair and looked round the room as if she saw nothing of what she looked at but did see more than was there. With both hands she pushed the hair off her face in a bewildered way; gave a deep sigh and shuddered as she had shuddered once before. Then she flung up her arms with a piercing shriek and fell back in her chair—dead! The

aneurism had done its work, and that sudden, sharp awakening from her drowsy slumber had been the last strain which the dilated vessel would bear. She was dead. Her husband's poetry had at last killed her.

CHAPTER V.

UNDER THE LASH.

"What a pity! What a thousand pities!" said Augusta Latrobe with cumulative sympathy when she heard the sad news, and how sweet, kind, patient Mrs. Branscombe had died as she had lived, without giving trouble to any one; with no parade of circumstance; quietly effacing herself to the last. "How I wish she had lived a little longer!"

"What is the use of wishing in that childish way?" replied Mrs. Morshead severely. "She went when she was called. That was enough for her; and ought to be enough for you and all of us."

"But if that call had only been put off for a little while!" said the graceless widow quite seriously. "If that poor dear Stella could have been married before it came!"

"Oh, yes, of course Stella's marriage is what runs in your head!" returned the mother with fierce sarcasm. "That is all you think of—all that any of you modern young women think of! Poor dear Mrs. Branscombe might have lived or died so far as she herself was concerned, and neither you, nor any one of your kind, would have cared. So long as that young minx had got her husband, Mr. and Mrs. Branscombe both might have died twenty times over, and not one of you would have thought twice of them, poor dear souls!"

"I don't think that," said Augusta tranquilly.

"But as things are it only makes two sorrows instead of one. If Stella had been safely married it would have been so much out of the fire. And it does no one any good that she and Cyril Ponsonby should be unhappy."

"And you would have them married and that poor dear woman not cold in her grave yet?" said Mrs. Morshead. "Upon my word, Augusta, you are a nice kind of daughter, I must say! A mother is nothing to you, it seems—only a money-box that you can put your hand into when you want anything from her, and care no more about when you have done! As for thinking that you owe any duty to a parent—that you should be loving, obedient,

respectful—oh, no! we are far too liberal for such old-fashioned notions nowadays! It is as much as we poor old people can expect if you young ones allow that we have the right to live at all. Why don't you get us all out of the way so that you can do what you like with what we leave?"

"To be sorry for Mrs. Branscombe's death does not look as if I did not care for mothers in general," said Augusta.

"Yes, but why are you sorry? For Stella's sake, not her own," retorted Mrs. Morshead.

"No, for her own," insisted Augusta. "I was very fond of Mrs. Branscombe—she was so gentle and sweet-tempered; and she was always very, very good to me, so I ought to have been fond of her—and I was."

"Perhaps her temper was not tried as some persons' is," said Mrs. Morshead grimly. "And remember, Augusta, it is not so difficult to be good-tempered with people when you do not see too much of them;" she added significantly. "The test is when you live with them, and learn all their disagreeable ways, and see their selfishness and heartlessness. Let Mrs. Branscombe have been tried as some people are, and I dare say she would have been no better than her neighbours."

"I think she was better than most," returned her daughter. "Every one knows what an amiable darling she was. She was a perfect angel!"

"You are always in extremes, Augusta. How I wish you would learn to be more moderate and sensible! But you always were one of the most exaggerating children possible; and I see no improvement in you—no sign that you are getting rid of your silly habit, which is nothing better than telling stories when you come to think of it."

Mrs. Morshead spoke angrily, and in her anger let some stitches drop in her knitting, which did not tend to improve her temper.

- "It is a bad habit," said Augusta, who seldom cared to defend herself; "but one very difficult to overcome," smiling. "Big words come so natural to one."
- "Naturally! A woman of your age, with a son to educate, excusing yourself like a silly girl, because it is 'natural,'" growled Mrs. Morshead. "You ought to be ashaned of yourself, Augusta. I am sure it makes me quite miserable when I think of that poor dear child, and how he is ruined by the way in which he is being brought up."
 - "I hope not quite ruined, mamma," said

Augusta cheerfully. "I do my best for him; and on the whole he is a very good little man."

"He is a troublesome little monkey, that is what he is," said Mrs. Morshead crossly. "A good little man, indeed !—a tiresome little toad you mean;—always in some mischief or other! I met him yesterday in the garden with a beautiful large geranium in his hand. And now, Augusta, you will please to understand—I will not have that boy pick my flowers. Once for all-and I will not give you a second warning—if ever I find him with another garden flower, he shall not go near the beds again. He shall not break and destroy everything as he does, as if he were lord and master forsooth. Not in my lifetime, Augusta! When I am dead and gone you can do what you like—dance on my grave if you like—as I dare say you will. I don't expect much else from you. But while I am alive I am mistress; and I will not be trampled under foot by an undutiful girl and her noisy, impudent, troublesome little boy! I have seen too much of that kind of thing in others to submit to it myself. So I tell you in time."

"I am sorry if Tony picked the flowers," said Augusta. "He has strict orders not to do so, and I have never known him disobey."

"Then how did he get that geranium yesterday I should like to know?" said Mrs. Morshead sharply. "Did it pick itself and put itself into his hand? I suppose that is what you will be saying next."

"He told me he found it lying on the Long Walk. Perhaps Page dropped it when he was bringing in the flowers for the table," said

Augusta.

"He told a falsehood," returned Mrs. Morshead sharply. "Page never lets the flowers fall. And now he shall be punished for two faults instead of one."

Augusta said no more. She never encouraged a discussion of any kind on her little son, whom she kept out of his grandmother's sight as much as possible. It was the only thing to do; though for doing it she was of course blamed by her mother, as she would have been had she done the contrary. The terrible old woman had been a harsh mother even to her own child; to her grandchild she was simply cruel; though the little fellow was as good as the traditional gold of the nursery simile. Yet had he been a boy-angel come down from heaven she would have fallen foul of him for some fault evolved out of her own hard temper and spirit of opposition. It was for nothing wrong or even

wilful that she rated him as she did. If quiet, she said it made her nervous to see a little fellow like that so unnaturally still, and she was sure he had water on the brain and was growing idiotic-or that he was sulky and deserved a whipping to get the black dog off his back. If lively and a little restless, after the manner of his age, she sent him out of the room with a rebuke for making too much noise —perhaps the verbal rebuke was translated into manual action, which effectually damped his childish gaiety and changed his merry laugh to bitter sobs. It was impossible for him to do right; for his very existence was the offence. Was he not the son of that disgraceful Professor Latrobe?—that penniless physicist who had married Augusta Morshead without making a settlement and had died without leaving her an income! And when Mrs. Morshead thought of this she wondered at her own goodness in receiving back to The Laurels at all her undutiful daughter and this living witness of her fault.

This marriage with a poor man who had been unable to provide for her, was the gigantic grievance of a life that had been one long chord of grievances—variation succeeding to variation, but the main theme—the wickedness of the world, and the ill conduct of all and sundry to herself—ever the same. Had Professor Latrobe been alive and wealthy Mrs. Morshead would have found some other peg on which to hang the pall of her dissatisfaction; as he was dead, and as he had died poor, she was spared the trouble of going farther; and the widow and the child had the benefit of her bitterness and complainings.

"And I will not have him brought up in these extravagant habits of yours," continued Mrs. Morshead, after a pause. "Considering that you have not a penny of your own, Augusta, and have to come to me for everything you want, I must say you are dreadfully extravagant, and might be more considerate. You never think of what things cost, and just squander away the money as if it were so much water or sand."

"I am very sorry, mamma, but I really did think I had been careful," said Augusta, who was, in truth, a marvel of economical resource and thriftiness.

"Careful! and there is that boy of yours in his best clothes to-day gone off to play with that little Turk, Nora Pennefather! You call that being careful, do you? I do not. A pretty mess he will be in when he comes back from that house, the most untidy, disorderly place in all Highwood! How you can let him associate with that horrid little girl I cannot think!"

"Why you see, mamma, Nora is the only child of Tony's age in the place; and it is good for him to have a playmate sometimes," said Augusta.

"Not such a forward little hussy as that!" retorted Mrs. Morshead. "Better be a nice well-conducted little fellow without playmates than go rampaging and racketing about with Nora Pennefather. The state he will be in when he comes home—all covered with jam or torn to tatters. I know! Where is the money to come from to support all this recklessness? It will end in my having to give up this place; I foresee that; and you might as well dig my grave at once as ask me to give up The Laurels! But I have not Fortunatus's purse, and I cannot do everything."

"His everyday clothes are really too shabby to be worn outside the garden," said Augusta. "I have mended and patched till I can mend and patch no more; and your grandson should be decent for your sake, you see," she added with a pretty smile and playful half-caressing accent. "My grandson, indeed! A pretty grandson you have given—a beggar's child," grumbled the old woman.

"And now that we are talking of Tony's wardrobe, shall I go to Graham's and order a new suit for him?" continued Augusta, speaking as if she had not heard her mother's last words, speaking indeed as if it were quite easy to ask for what she wanted, and just as certain that she would get it when she had asked for it. "He really is getting too disreputable!" she went on to say, her manner tranquil, however perturbed might be her feeling; "and as his best suit is not over-fresh as it is, it will soon be worn out if he takes it into daily use, as he must very soon. Children knock their clothes out so frightfully!"

"Then he should be taught not to 'knock them out so frightfully," said Mrs. Morshead in reply. "That is just where I blame you, Augusta. You never teach him anything, never check, nor contradict, nor correct him from one day's end to the other. You let him do just as he likes—scamper all over the house, helter-skelter like a wild colt—run wild about the place—pull the flowers—tear his clothes—tell falsehoods—do just as he likes, as if he were a savage. And I have to bear the brunt

and pay for all his mischief. And yet I am not allowed a voice in the matter. My goodness! you should have seen the way in which we were brought up! As if we dared to have disputed our mother's will, as you and that boy of yours dispute mine!"

"Dear mamma—I only wish to please you,"

said Augusta sweetly.

"Please me!" she grumbled. "It is an odd way you take, Augusta. For my part I do not know what the world is coming to. You young people and your children are just appalling. That is what you are."

"I am sorry you think I am doing badly by my child and you," said Augusta, a slight twitch about her lips though her voice was quite smooth and gentle. "But we have not settled about the clothes yet. Shall I order him a new suit at Graham's?"

"No," said Mrs. Morshead sharply. "I will see to it myself. You are not to be trusted with anything, Augusta. Make out your list and let me look over it. If I do not keep an eye on you, goodness knows what folly you may not commit. I might as well have two children to look after," she added, twitching the knitted woollen shawl over her shoulders with an impatient pull. "I have everything to do;

and you might be such a help to me if you would!"

"I would help you, mamma, gladly, if you would let me," said her daughter.

"Vex me by your incapacity and ruin me by your extravagance, you mean," was the ungracious response. "I wish I could trust to you; but how can I—such a light-minded feather-head as you are? Tell me what you want for that boy of yours, if indeed you know yourself what it is. Oh!" as her daughter brought out a written list from her workbasket; "you have got it all cut and dried have you? Upon my word, Augusta, you have coolness enough for a dozen! That I will say of you. However, give it to me and let me see what you have had the conscience to put down."

Augusta rose from her place and came over to her mother, with the list of poor Tony's necessaries in her hand. The terrible old woman took the paper, readjusted her spectacles and read it, sotto voce, to herself. It was a very modest list—the least that could possibly be done with; but Mrs. Morshead read each insignificant item as if it were a question of nuggets and white elephants.

Her daughter continued her work of em-

broidering a silk jacket with bugles as quietly as if her heart had not sunk and her courage had not died. Of all the pains included in her dependent position, this of asking her mother for clothes for her child was perhaps the worst to bear.

At last Mrs. Morshead, looking over her spectacles and holding out the paper diagonally, came to the point.

"How can you be so absurd, Augusta, as to make out such a ridiculous list as that?" she said crossly. "Do you want the poor child to look like the beggar he is? Not while I have a sixpence to spend on his comfort and respectability! A black and white check for his best! It is an insult to me to propose such a thing. He shall have a velvet; and the black and white may do for every day. I cannot have him go about the world in the disgraceful state you think good enough for him. He is my grandson; and if you do not care for his appearance, I do."

"You are very good, mamma," said Augusta affectionately. "I am sure I am most grateful to you."

"Good? Of course I am good! Whoever thought I was not!" snapped the mother. "A great deal too good to you, such a tiresome,

undutiful girl as you are; and so I tell you. But I will not have you say that I do not do my duty by your poor little boy. Poor fellow! He has only me to look to; and he shall not be neglected as you would be quite willing to neglect him, if I did not look after him."

Augusta made no answer. With the sweetest manner and the most unruffled sweetness of temper, she had a wonderful way of sticking to her point and dropping all side issues. She had accomplished her main purpose of the moment, and secured a new supply of clothes for her son; and whether her mother took the tone of the child's protector against her neglect, or whether she had, which was just as likely, given her a severe scolding for extravagance, it was much the same to Augusta. The grant of the new supply was the bread; the manner in which it was made was the bitter sauce wherewith that bread had to be eaten. Still, the former was the essential fact, the latter only an adventitious circumstance; and while grateful for the one she must pass over the other as unimportant. Yet, oh! how ardently she wished that she could find her bread in any other cornfield than this thorny one of home! -that she could ensure her son's fortune by any other course than this of submission to her

mother's tyranny and contempt! But until some other haven of refuge presented itself—would it ever?—she was bound to this, stony, inhospitable, grudging, as it was. And her only wisdom was to make the best of that which she could not mend and must perforce endure.

The conversation went no further on uncomfortable ways for the present; for soon after Mrs. Morshead had flung her last poisoned little shaft the servant announced "Mr. Kemp," and not even the terrible old woman was quite equal to the task of scolding her daughter as her greeting to a visitor. She contented herself therefore with an angry kind of grunt, as a tall, grave, quiet-mannered but pleasant-looking man came into the room and strode across the floor with the bearing of a soldier and the look of a king.

CHAPTER VI.

LIGHT AND SHADOW.

LOOKING first at Augusta with a slight smile of pleasure round his mouth and a certain gladness in his eyes, Sandro Kemp, the artist, formally greeted Mrs. Morshead before he spoke to her daughter, as it was but good breeding But he greeted her as one to whom she was no bugbear, terrible as she might be to others: one who neither courted nor feared her, and who knew how to hold his own without interfering with her rights or suffering her to go beyond her own lawful boundaries and into his domain. The very core of Sandro Kemp's character was that grave and manly kind of dignity which neither takes liberties nor allows them—that proud humility coupled with self-respect which makes a man acknowledge the shortcomings of his position in the

world while conscious of his own intrinsic worth—that large kind of disdain for, yet submission to, social barriers and conventional hindrances which marks one who understands the higher laws of life but who will not impose his own convictions on another—that steadfastness to his own side and toleration for the side opposed to him, which proclaim the true liberal and the man with an educated con-Even his enemies — and he had enemies like others—were forced to admit that he was neither intolerant nor selfish; though such as Mrs. Morshead said that was because he was latitudinarian for the one part and wanted to make friends with the Mammon of Unrighteousness for the other. For all that, when they took it in hand to circulate stories to his discredit, they had first to invent them.

There were not wanting some in Highwood with this faculty for creating fancy biographies; and Sandro had his full share of their unrooted flowers of imagination. He was unmarried, handsome, poor, a favourite with women, and of that plastic profession which gives a gentleman no standing of itself but is honourable or mean according to proficiency and emolument. Hence he was a fair target for the spears of the idle and the jealous; and among

those who liked him least, and who were most anxious to find the weak places in his armour wherein to thrust their lance-heads, was the terrible old woman who held sway at The Laurels.

Sandro Kemp was indeed no favourite with Mrs. Morshead. He was only an architect; only an artist; a man who gave lessons when he could find pupils; who drew pictures for his amusement and designed houses for his daily bread; and Mrs. Morshead was always wanting to know what kind of profession that was for a man who called himself a gentleman? And he was poor. He lived in lodgings because he was not able to afford a house; and he was unmarried because he was not able to afford a wife, unless he could find one with money who would be silly enough to stoop to his condition. He paid his way honestly and punctually—so much must be admitted; "but what a way it was!" Mrs. Morshead used to say with disdain when she discussed Mr. Kemp's personal history, as she was prone to do-no one knew exactly why, for it was one which gave her no pleasure to contemplate. Especially was she prone to discuss him with Augusta, and always with strange acrimony, as if seeking to indemnify

herself for the restraint put on her by the irresistible dignity of his presence.

"Sandy Kemp," as she was fond of calling him, in derision for the somewhat affected name which had been imposed on him by a dilettante godfather, who coated the pill with a golden promise that he did not keep—"Sandy Kemp" might have committed some crime in the dark days of his obscure past for the doubt rising into certainty which she expressed of his character, and the dislike for his person which she always hinted had its full justification if only she might tell all she knew. "Sandy Kemp" was bold, and knew neither his place nor his betters, and some day she would tell him so. He should remember who he was, and how his position was one strictly of sufferance—architects and artists and queer people of that kind, not being gentlefolks like those who owned houses and lands and whose forefathers were lying decently in the churchyard, with mural tablets on the church walls to commemorate their names, dates and ages. And therefore, if "Sandy Kemp" had the good fortune to be taken notice of by those who were gentlefolks, he ought to remember that it was only out of benevolence, not because of his own merits. "Sandy Kemp" was first a Radical and probably a Freethinker, then a declared Communist and a professed Atheist, according to the ascending scale of her displeasure. And "Sandy Kemp" did not know his own mother tongue; for in a speech made at the school feast he said that he was "averse from" something or other; and who that understands the English language says "averse from," Mrs. Morshead would like to know?—an ignorant fellow like this setting himself up to speak and teach! It was enough to make the dead turn in their graves!

Though she tried hard, Mrs. Morshead could never induce Augusta to take up the cudgels in the artist's defence. Poor Augusta had enough to do with her own affairs and Tony's. She did not want more on her hands than she had already. When her mother was more than usually rabid concerning this one of her many bêtes noires, she would try to turn the conversation into some other channel; which always had the effect of making Mrs. Morshead more angry than before, and of concentrating her bitterness on herself. Still, she carefully refrained from defending any one whom her mother chose to attack-Sandro Kemp or any other. And the sense of drawing blank given by her imperturbable quietness made the terrible old woman more terrible still for want of attri-

tion and a safety-valve. Just as the dentition of certain animals requires something which they can tear and gnaw, so did Mrs. Morshead's temper demand some one with whom she could quarrel. If Augusta would have gratified her in this, and would every now and then have had a wordy wrangle, perhaps things would have been better in the end, and she would have gained by the process. The air would have been cleared; the old woman would have got rid of some of her chronic ill-temper in fierce epithets and unjust accusations; she would have gratified her vanity by her cleverness in vituperation; and then the inevitable reaction would have set in and things would have gone better—until the next accumulation of moral thunder-clouds was dispersed by an explosion.

This possibility never entered into the calculations of that sweet-tempered, self-restrained and reasonable creature, her daughter. It seemed to Augusta the best policy to make herself round because her mother was angular, and to oppose smoothness to her spiky irritability so that both should not move on the same hard lines together, but that one might slip while the other struck. Acting on these principles she carefully abstained from taking

up the glove so continually thrown down on Mr. Kemp's account; letting everything pass as blandly as if venomous insinuations were friendly praises and bitter accusations kindly confessions of interest and respect—which had the effect of making Mrs. Morshead still more inimical to the artist, and of late more disagreeable to, and somewhat suspicious of, her daughter. So that now when Sandro came into the room, and greeted her with the conventional: "How do you do, Mrs. Morshead?" she gave a curious kind of a grunt rather than an answer, as she offered him two hard, inhospitable fingers, which she twitched out of his with an impatient jerk almost before he had taken them. But Sandro only thought within himself: "This terrible old creature is in worse form than usual, to-day," looking anxiously to Augusta to see if any signs of trouble were visible on that fair, smooth, placid face. There were none. The young widow had learned not only to control herself but also her muscles; and she could make her face, when she chose, no more expressive than so much sweet and mindless wax-work. And this was what she made it now in answer to the artist's eyes.

"I suppose you have heard the painful news?" said Sandro, after he had been seated

for a short time and had discussed the weather and the prospects of the harvest, foreign politics and home legislation, the bills which had to be passed and those which had been abandoned, —for Mrs. Morshead was a politician inter alia, and liked to air her theories. Those theories were always diametrically opposed to Mr. Kemp's ideas; of that he was very certain, whatever he might say. The terrible old woman would not have agreed with him had he echoed her own sentiments; and she set her heel on every independent assertion as if it had been a personal affront intended for her and to be resented accordingly.

"You mean Mrs. Branscombe?" she answered. "Yes, of course, we have heard it. There are always plenty of ravens in the world to come about you with their croakings and dead worms and things. No fear of not hearing of one's friends' death and ruin! What I should like to see would be a little more alacrity in letting me hear good news!"

She said this with a manner that seemed to accuse Sandro Kemp of Mrs. Branscombe's death; at the same time insinuating that he had no end of good things under his cloak, which he refrained from bringing out because of the inbred perversity and wickedness of his nature.

Augusta's delicate cheeks became a trifle deeper in tint.

- "That poor Stella, how she will feel it!" she said hurriedly.
- "They ought to have been prepared; it was their own fault if they were not," returned her mother grimly. "They knew that she had heart disease, and might be taken at any moment."
- "But no one is prepared for the sudden death of one loved," said Sandro gently. "Love refuses to be influenced by any mere fact of mental knowledge."
- "Oh, I am not clever enough for metaphysics," said Mrs. Morshead with a sneer. "I only know that we die when our hour has come, and that we ought to be prepared. All this extravagant grief is just rebellion against God's goodness; and no sentimentality can make anything else of it."
- "I was not aware that there was any extravagant grief at Rose Hill," said Sandro quietly. "And do you call the recognition of the emotions sentimentality, Mrs. Morshead? We cannot speak of humanity without taking them into account."
- "I call everything sentimentality that sets itself against honest common sense," said Mrs.

Morshead; "and everything Atheism that questions the plain will of God," she added significantly.

"That may be, but no one was advocating either the one or the other," said Sandro. "We were only talking of the shock that Mrs. Branscombe's sudden death must have been to them all at Rose Hill; and especially to poor Miss Branscombe who loved her mother so dearly."

"As to that I dare say she will manage to get over her shock in a very short time," said Mrs. Morshead with a vicious glance at Augusta. "Girls do not care, nowadays, so much for their mothers as to break their hearts when they go. A good riddance some would say—some not a hundred miles from here!"

"Would they? I do not know these young ladies," answered Sandro. "And at all events Miss Branscombe is not one of them."

"Miss Branscombe is no better than other modern young misses. She has her lover; and what do you think she cares for a mother dead or alive in comparison with that?" said Mrs. Morshead. "Mothers are only made for their children's convenience, according to the horrible doctrines of the present day. Children owe nothing to their parents—no love, no duty, no obedience—nothing! They live just for them-

selves and their own pleasures; for nothing else in the world; and that is modern daughterliness! I wonder it does not bring down a judgment from heaven, I declare I do!"

"Are we quite so bad as this, mamma? I don't think you really believe it!" said Augusta lightly, trying to give a brighter tone to the conversation.

Mrs. Morshead looked up from under her heavy frowning brows.

"I do not think you need ask," she said with sullen emphasis.

"No," said Sandro Kemp with perfect gravity and sweetness; "indeed Mrs. Latrobe need not. Every one knows her marvellous amiability and how superior she is both as a daughter and a mother. She is the bright example of the whole neighbourhood—a standard for all others to live by and come up to if they can."

"I wish them joy," said Mrs. Morshead, twitching her shawl, while Augusta laughed in her bright careless way; but those two pink spots on her cheeks burned somewhat uncomfortably. "It is as well to have a standard, certainly," she continued lifting her lip, and showing her two eye-teeth as a dog shows his fangs when he snarls.

"They could not have a better," said Sandro,

something burning on his cheeks too and passing, despite himself, into his eyes.

"When and where did you take your lessons in flattery, Mr. Kemp?" asked Mrs. Morshead, with a quick, suspicious glance from the artist's somewhat too eloquent face to her daughter's—serene, impassive, unmoved, save for that slightly-heightened colour. "Have you been to Ireland, may I ask?"

"And kissed the blarney stone?" he added with a smile. "No; nor have I had any lessons that I can remember. Perhaps, though, my mother gave them to me, when she used to tell me to look for the good in life rather than the bad, and never to be afraid of recognizing beauty and virtue when I saw them."

"To my way of thinking, truth stands first of all things," said Mrs. Morshead. "Beauty and virtue are all very well when you find them; but I should like to know where you do."

"Often," said Sandro emphatically; "far more often than not; so that my principle of admiring what is lovely is identical with yours of confessing the truth before all things."

"The two are identical in Stella Branscombe; and so they were in poor dear Mrs. Branscombe," said Augusta.

How much she longed to change this second

current of talk! Yet into whatever channel she might divert it, there was always the same danger of collision and disagreement.

"Mrs. Branscombe could not have been a very nice woman in reality to have ever married that contemptible old fribble," said Mrs. Morshead. "Of all the men I have ever known I think he is the most contemptible; and I have known some that came very near him." Here she looked at Sandro. "Still, he is about the worst, take him for all in all."

"Yours is a wide net, Mrs. Morshead," said Sandro. "At least, Mr. Branscombe does no one any harm; and if he has aspirations and ideas beyond his power of adequate expression, it is his misfortune rather than his fault."

"It is only his vanity that makes him attempt more than he can do," said Mrs. Morshead. "I am sure those ridiculous bits of poetry, that he prints in gold on glazed cards and sends about to all the neighbourhood, make one ill to read them, such horrid stuff as they are! I am a plain woman, Mr. Kemp, and speak plain English—which every one does not do."

"Vanity, or the need of occupation? Vanity, or the honest belief that he has done well, and that he gives his neighbours pleasure in reading and hearing what he has done? We must have

some interest in life; and it is better to have one of a harmless kind, even though the execution be weak, than to spend one's time in idleness and gossip," said the artist.

"He has his home and his family, his estate and all the parish business that he ought to do, and does not. If he chose, he might have interest and occupation enough without writing bad poetry and painting worse pictures," snapped Mrs. Morshead.

"He would still have some unoccupied time on his hands," said the artist. "We men cannot employ our spare hours in doing the dainty stitchwork which comes so naturally to you ladies."

He looked at Augusta's length of silk with its traceries of bugles and beads.

"Then let him do some good with his time," said Mrs. Morshead. "We have poverty and ignorance enough among us—let him help these and leave his silly trash that he calls art alone! Art, indeed! Art is a bad business for a man when it is his profession and he has to get his bread by it; but when it does not do even this it is worse than child's play."

"Talking of art, Mrs. Latrobe, have you read the review of the Academy in the last week's Saturday?—it is the best that I have seen for a long time. I should like to know who wrote it. Whoever did, knew what he was about."

As he said this Sandro turned to Augusta with an imprudent sigh of relief. The sour temper and jangling contradictiousness of her mother had never tried him so much as they did to-day, and he had never pitied that sweet, fair woman so much as now when he thought of her hourly subjection to this hard domestic martyrdom.

"Are you praised in it, Mr. Kemp?" asked Mrs. Morshead with an unpleasant laugh.

"Yes, I have read it," answered Augusta hastily, her words breaking through her mother's. "It seemed wonderfully well done; very just so far as I could make out, and very appreciative."

"Oh, these things are all managed behind backs!" interrupted Mrs. Morshead. "Caw me, caw thee; that is the rule. That review was bought and paid for by every man who was praised in it. I would stake my life on it!"

"And I would stake mine that you are wrong," said the artist a little warmly. "Do you allow no honesty in the world, Mrs. Morshead?"

"As much as I can see through a microscope—no more," was the bitter reply.

"Ah, well, I do not agree with you," he said.
"I believe in men and women as the best things we know, and I should be sorry to hold the pessimist doctrines which are so fashionable just now."

"And what may you please to mean by your 'pessimist doctrines'?" asked Mrs. Morshead, throwing a satirical emphasis on the words. "I am a plain, old-fashioned woman and have not learnt your modern jargon."

"Do you remember an old paper in the Spectator or the Tatler, I forget which?" said Sandro; "a paper where a parallel description is given of two women, Arachne, and Melissa? Arachne is the pessimist there; and pessimism means simply a belief in the sinfulness and wretchedness of humanity rather than in its goodness and aspiration; a delight in finding out the blemishes everywhere rather than in dwelling on the beauties; making ourselves unhappy in the shadow but not rejoicing in the sunlight; seeing the evil all around and denying the good. That is pessimism; and that is the fashionable philosophy of our day. To me it is morbid, sickly, untrue, and infinitely disastrous to the character of those who hold it and to the truth of things as they are."

"It is certainly a very suicidal kind of

doctrine," said Augusta, as her contribution of rose-leaves. "It is so far more pleasant, as well as more charitable, to think well and not ill of people."

Just for one instant she lifted her eyes to the artist's face and looked at him as if in self-forgetfulness, her eyes full of sweetness and admiration. Then she let them fall on her work; and again that faint colour, which was her most marked sign of feeling, stole over her face and neck like the reflection of a rosy cloud cast on the snow.

He also changed colour as he looked at her with as much inquiry as earnestness. His eyes seemed to ask hers what was true, and what was only the appearance of things? Then he passed his hand over his beard, according to a way he had, and checked a sigh as a man turning from a lovely picture which he could not hope to possess—from the vision of some sweet peaceful valley which he must not enter—turning back to the bare prose of his naked home, to the barren desolation of his toilsome way.

"Fools' paradises!" sneered Mrs. Morshead. "Believe in men and women when the best friend you have will buy and sell you for sixpence, and your very children are not to be trusted?—Rubbish, Mr. Kemp! and you know

that you are talking rubbish! I prefer the truth."

"The whole contention is in what is the truth," said Sandro, passing over the accusation as if he had not heard it. "No one wants to hug himself in pleasant falsehoods; but we must never forget that there is just as much chance of untruth in disbelief as in credulity. The two things are the mere doubles of each other."

"And I say they are not," said Mrs. Morshead angrily. "And at my time of life I ought to know."

"Well! we shall never agree in our ideas of humanity and goodness," said Sandro rising to take leave. "We must be content to differ."

"I don't call having my own opinion on things differing from yours," said Mrs. Morshead rudely. "To differ there must be some kind of equality, and I don't see much equality between you and me, Mr. Kemp."

"No?" he said smiling. "Does not my man's wider experience in life make up, somewhat, for the greater length of yours?"

"Your man's wider experience as you call it may not perhaps have taught you the same things as mine has taught me," said Mrs. Morshead dryly. "And I am not used to be compared to a young man like yourself, Mr. Kemp,

young enough to be my son and without a stake in the country as we old proprietors have. When you compare yourself next time let it be with your equals!"

"I meant no offence to you, Mrs. Morshead," said the artist quietly.

"Then you should look before you leap, and think before you speak," she answered sharply; "and remember next time to whom you speak when you address a lady of my age and station!" "A most disagreeable pragmatical forward fellow," she said angrily to her daughter when Sandro had gone; "and I wish to goodness he would not come here as he does. What does he want I wonder? The spoons? or is he wanting to borrow money of me? I hate his coming as he does with his long words and pedantic way of talking-argue, argue, argue, till one is almost dazed and stupefied. One cannot say a thing but he takes it up and makes some long nonsense about it. He is just the most unpleasant and conceited man in the place. His very name is enough to set one against him. Sandro Kemp! Why not honest Sandy at once? The affectation of that Italian is revolting."

"But that is not his fault exactly," said Augusta, when her mother stopped and looked to her for an answer. "He was christened Sandro, you know; he did not give himself the name."

"Then he ought to change it," snapped Mrs. Morshead, all alive with indignation. "And listen to me, Augusta, I am not going to have you defend that impudent fellow. A young woman like you ought to be more modest than this. What business is it of yours whether he was christened Sandro or not? Such forwardness! What next I wonder?"

As Augusta did not say what was to tread on the heels of her present iniquity, the conversation dropped, and for half an hour the peace of silence reigned between them.

Meanwhile, Sandro Kemp, walking back to his lodgings, asked himself again and again this one ever recurring and unanswerable question; "Did she mean it?"

CHAPTER VII.

IMPOSSIBILITIES.

It was the day after poor Mrs. Branscombe's funeral. The ceremonial had been of that gloomy magnificence which is supposed to relieve the hearts and assuage the sorrow of the bereaved and to show proper respect to the unconscious dead. No expense had been spared to make the whole thing a local fête draped in black and silver; and Mr. Branscombe's manifestations of mourning had all been as perfectly ordered and as artistically arranged as were the decorations of his house and the appointments of his studio.

The neighbours far and wide had been invited to join their tepid tears and transitory sorrow with the sacred grief of the desolate widower and his motherless girl—to makebelieve that the death of sweet and placid Mrs.

Branscombe was a true tragedy in their lives, for which they put on spiritual mourning as well as the hatbands and scarves proper to the occasion. But it gratified Mr. Branscombe to see this large array of friendly mourners; and it gratified him still more to be able to pose before them as the heart-broken but still dignified and gentlemanlike victim of fate and sorrow. He translated into his voice and bearing on this day of woe, the old spirit of the aforetime Finery Fred, the lady-killer who used to study before his glass the looks and postures which he thought would be most convincing, and who trained his voice to the passionate accents and deep pathetic tones by which he hoped to carry the last lingering strongholds of doubt and fear; -of Finery Fred, the Beauty-man of his regiment, who went in for the leadership in taste and elegance and the "right thing to do," and whose highest ambition was to be a superior kind of M. C., and regimental Lord Chamberlain.

Sad as this occasion was, it was nevertheless one which called forth all his power. Wherefore he organized for his good Matilda the details of a funeral fit for a royal Princess, and laid in their quiet churchyard with overwhelming pomp the dead body of one who had lived

but for her home and family and whose whole existence had been passed in modesty and self-effacement. And the neighbours came as they were bidden; and many of them laughed at the widower with his artistic despair, and said "What a mountebank that fellow was; and would anything ever teach him truth or simplicity!"

Still, the more intimate friends were really sorry for the loss of this gentle life from among them. There were some to whom she had been as an enduring exhortation to gentleness and love; and some to whom she had been as a faint and precious perfume, reminding them of the best days of their innocent youth and of spiritual graces perhaps long forgotten and laid aside. And to others she had been of more active help by her few words of wise counsel, by the crystal purity of her thoughts, and by that ready sympathy with their difficulties, either of mind or circumstance, which is perhaps the greatest help of all because having the most soothing influence.

Among those who mourned her with the sense of personal loss, Augusta Latrobe was foremost and the most sincere. She had lost not only a wise and real friend in Mrs. Branscombe, but her only confidente. To her alone

had she ever dared to open her heart, to reveal her sorrows, to show the weight of the cross which she carried. By her death the young widow was made friendless, in the vital sense of friendship; and henceforth she must be sufficient for herself. It was a terrible loss for her; and to-day, when the air was stiller than usual after the sombre excitement of yesterday, she felt the blank that had come into her life more painfully than she had yet realized.

It was long since she had mourned as she was mourning now as she walked by the riverside—her little son now running before her, now loitering behind-her little son who made up the sole sunshine of her life, her only store of happiness and love! The song of the birds, the sound of the rushing waters, the sweet scents of meadow and copse and hedgerow which came round her like a cloud as she strolled onwards, scarce seeing where she went —the life and gaiety, the good health and beauty of her boy—all this was only dimly perceptible to her mind; while the loneliness of her life, the hard hand of her mother, the dreary necessities of her position, the crushing tyranny of the home in which she must perforce take shelter, the loss of her best and dearest friend, her only counsellor and confidante, were the

prominent feelings of the moment and the terrible facts of her real existence.

"If only I could do something that would give me a home of my own and not hurt my boy's future!" she thought for the hundredth time since her husband's death. "If only poor Antonio had lived until the boy had grown up!" she thought again.

It was characteristic of Augusta that she made her son's welfare of more importance than her own loss in the death of her husband; with whom, however, she had lived in profound peace and concord—of itself happiness enough after the perpetual jangle of her mother's house. And indeed though she had not loved her shy, reserved, queer-mannered and odd-looking Professor as she knew that she could love had she the fitting chance, she had respected him very thoroughly and never let him feel that want of which she herself was conscious. Her sweetness and suavity had done all that love could have done, and had made him even happier than more passionate demonstrations would have made him. She was just the kind of wife that he wanted; and his marriage fulfilled its intention with the most perfect smoothness. Among all her memories no shadow of remorse ever intruded its ghastly

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presence. She could not reproach herself with undutifulness or cruelty, with neglect of her husband's wishes or indifference to his happiness, nor feel aught but that she had made his last years blessed beyond any he had lived before. It had been a very pleasant, mild and rational kind of friendship. He had loved her more than he knew how to show or had had time to fathom; and she had not loved him at all. But she had made him happy all the same; which was the one thing needful.

Still, her heart was virgin and she had all the shy desires and timid dreams of one whose wealth of love has not yet been given. Only those who are conscious of their power of loving are conscious of the void; and she knew but too well what she had missed and what she had never felt. If it were possible! If she could! She knew what would make her life one long summer's day of blessedness:—a grave but kind and gentle man, strong, just, resolute, tender; a man who understood life and could see all round a subject; who was observant for the one part and thoughtful for the other; who would love her, but not blindly, so that he should help her to be her best self and would not, for the weakness which belongs to some men's love, foster her follies; a man who would be her

superior and yet her lover, her king and yet her knight.

And thinking all this, letting her thoughts drift idly on the rainbow spanning the sky of hope, she came full on Sandro Kemp, leaning against the bole of an elm-tree, making a study of the rocks which just at this part broke the swift current of the river into a dozen small cascades.

Both started—Sandro so visibly that the thing confessed itself, but Augusta with a recovery so quick, so facile, as to hide her first confusion before it was seen. This sudden translation of her dreams into a personality shocked rather than confused her. And if her cheeks had that delicate pink flush which became her so well—the day was warm; the wood in which they found themselves was a little stifling despite the fresher breeze brought by the river; she had been running with her child; and she was naturally startled by coming on Mr. Kemp so suddenly—he standing there like the statue in Don Giovanni, she said with her frank laugh that seemed to clear the air and make wholesome sunshine round her as she stood.

Yet Sandro would have been more content if she had not laughed in that clear, light, bright way; if she had blushed more and stood with more consciousness of embarrassment and strain; if she had been less like her usual wise and selfcontrolled self and more like the normal shy and maybe silly school girl.

Having stumbled on him in this way, it was the most natural thing in the world that the widow should stay and look at the artist's work; and, having looked at it and praised the force here, the tenderness and subtlety there, it was also the most natural thing in the world that she should turn over with him the pages of his sketch-book and hear the history of this crocket and that finial—where he found this quaint fifteenth-century gable, and where this thirteenth-century, massive, square and nameless tower. These things came into his professional work; while sketching rocks was only his pastime to be taken up between whiles, when business was slack, as alas! it generally was.

He had good hopes now, however, of making his name and showing what he could do, he said. Had he put his meaning into the ordinary words of the unsuccessful, he would have said—of turning the corner which he had been so long in rounding. And when he told her of this hope of permanent fame, he showed her a rough sketch of his design for a stately palace about to

be built not far from Highwood by a millionaire from Cottonopolis. He had sent in his design with other competitors and hoped he should be the winner. If he were, the corner would indeed be turned and the smooth, straight road of fortune, fame and success fully entered on!

"Oh! you must get it!" said Augusta quite simply, but warmly too—perhaps warmly because simply. "This is so fine that I am sure you cannot be distanced by any other competitor. What a grand design it is! I have never seen anything more perfect, more beautiful!"

"And I have never received more precious praise," said the artist in a slightly tremulous voice, looking right into her eyes.

Augusta's face, which had been sincere, animated and sympathetic, took on itself that mask of mindless amiable wax which she could assume whenever she pleased.

"I am glad if my praise pleases you," she said; "but," laughing, "you must remember that I am quite ignorant of art and that I may admire what is really all wrong."

"If you admire at all, that is enough for me," said Sandro with dangerous fervour.

Augusta raised her eyes. She did not look

straight into her companion's face, but just a little below his mouth.

- "Surely not," she said quite gravely. "Your object is to succeed with the authorities, not to be praised by private friends."
- "By some, not all. The commendation of some would be all-sufficient for me."
- "I should prefer the fame and the money for my own part," she answered with an exasperating, prosaic, unsympathetic hardness, as unlike her warmer self as night is unlike the day.

Sandro looked at her half-puzzled, half-pained.

"The day is warm," he then said; "and this place is so lovely! Will you not sit here for a little while? We can watch your boy that he does not get into mischief; and see! this fallen tree makes an admirable seat."

The widow hesitated for just half a moment, then a certain resolute look stole like a film of ice over her soft eyes; her mouth grew hard and her lips were drawn together; her graceful, supple figure seemed to stiffen, and she looked like one who has suddenly taken a difficult resolve and who means to keep it.

"Yes," she said; "I will sit down for a little while. You can play about, Tony," she called out to the child; "but do not go too near the water."

"Oh, that is fun!" said the boy, as he scampered off—rejoicing in his freedom and forgetting the sorrowful lessons of his life at home and the sour hard visage of the grandmother who always rated and never caressed, always blamed and never praised.

"He is a noble-looking boy," said Sandro. "You may be congratulated on having such a son."

Like many of his tribe he was passionately fond of children, and, like Robert Southey, thought no home perfect that had not a kitten and a "child rising two" among its inmates.

"He is a dear little man," answered Tony's mother fondly; "and he gives very little trouble. He is high-spirited and all that, but he is so affectionate that I can guide him by a word. He rebels against scolding, and injustice makes him naughty; but he yields easily to kindness and fair dealing."

"Love is the best trainer for a child, just as affection is his best conscience," said Sandro. "Weakness, vacillation, want of fixed principles of action and all forms of injustice spoil children as rust spoils steel; but healthy love—never! Love spoils no one," he added, again looking at his companion with meaning.

"No, it does not," she answered, as tran-

quilly as if she had been talking of the weather or the state of the roads. Then, seeing that he seemed to wait for something more explicit than this cut and dried assent, she added: "But it is just the thing we have to learn to live without. We cannot all be loved."

"Why not?" he asked eagerly. "Surely there is no one in the world who might not be loved if he—or she—would accept what was offered. You yourself——"

"Oh! I am out of the question altogether," she interrupted, laughing lightly. "I have my mother to attend to and my darling boy to live for. When I said that we had to do without love, I meant many of us, not myself. I have all I can have—or care for."

"All you care for? Do you never think of making a new home for yourself—building up the shattered temple of your life?"

"With new decorations?" she answered brusquely. "Never!"

Sandro turned pale and looked again at the boy.

"Yet he would be better for a man's care," he said very gently.

She sighed softly, and the ice that had come into her eyes seemed suddenly to melt into something that looked like tears.

"Yes. I grant that," she answered in a low voice. "But I must do the best I can for him by myself. It would be impossible for me to marry again unless——"

She stopped.

"Unless what?" he asked, bending down his head as if to hear her answer more distinctly, and again looking full and fixedly into her face. He shifted his hand uneasily, and she knew that he checked the impulse to take hers.

"Well! unless I married one so rich as to ensure my boy's future should my mother disinherit him and me—as she would were I to marry again."

Augusta Latrobe spoke with the greatest apparent ease and frankness. The pink flush had fixed itself into burning red on her cheeks; her eyes were hard; her lips curiously dry. But save these small indications of strain, her air and voice and manner and expression were all as careless and undisturbed as even Mrs. Morshead could have desired.

"You see I am a very mercenary commonplace kind of person," she went on to say, not looking at Sandro but gazing straight before her across the river in the most untroubled and the frankest way imaginable. And yet—the flower held in her hand wavered so much that she laid it on her lap, and the beating of her heart was so quick and strong it shook the fringe of her cape as if the wind had blown it. "And, being commonplace, I do not deceive myself; and I never allow myself to dream," she continued in a matter-of-fact manner that cut into Sandro's very soul. Yet why should it? "I have to stay with my mother for the sake of my boy—stay with her, as I am now, for as long as she lives. Or, if I leave her, I must have my child's fortune assured. I could not wreck his future for my own present happiness. I must not. So you see I have no temptation to marry again; which simplifies my life so far."

Sandro did not speak. That something which comes into the throats of men and strangles their words had come into his, and he had to wait until he had mastered himself and his voice. He wondered why she had said this to him. Had she seen? and did she wish to warn him in time so as to spare him the humiliation of a refusal? Or was it just the natural outcome of her candour and simplicity? And was her quietness real or assumed?—the expression of serene indifference or the effort made by pride and will over a woman's weakness and a woman's desire? He had thought

—well! no matter what! Her words were plain and to the point, and thoughts and dreams go for nothing in the face of a direction so distinct. He must accept things as they were. An image might be broken but the shrine remained intact, and none could prevent his carrying his worship in secret where he might not make his devotions in public.

"And you never feel the want of a friend?" he asked after a long silence, during which she still looked across the river at the landscape beyond, her lips set into that hard fixed smile which expresses anything rather than joy or pleasure.

He did not look at her when he spoke, and his voice was low, rough and husky.

The smile passed from her lips and she ceased to gaze at that rich pasture-land before her.

"A friend? yes, indeed; I do feel the want of a friend," she said quickly. "Heaven only knows how much! how much, indeed, now that the only friend I had, sweet Mrs. Branscombe, is gone! But that, too, is not in my possibilities," she added, as if taking herself again in hand. "You see my mother is old and difficult, and she would not allow me to have a close friendship with any one, man or woman. I have to walk warily to keep even so much liberty as I have now."

"But you said just now that Mrs. Branscombe was your friend," he returned jealously.

- "One more intimate than frequent," she answered. "I did not see her often; but when I did she was everything to me."
 - " And you cannot replace her?"
 - " No."
- "Yet others would be to you all that she was," he said.
- "It cannot be. My mother would not allow it," she answered.
- "What a life! What a life!" he said indignantly.

"It cannot be helped," she answered. "It

is for my boy."

"And I can be of no good to you?" he asked with a sudden outburst of feeling. "Can I bring you no happiness? Cannot I lighten your burden by ever so little? You might do so much for me—you do already—can I do anything for you?"

"You are always good to me—always," she answered. "But you can be of no vital use to me, nor can I be of real good to you," she

added with meaning.

"Not as a simple friend?" he asked.

"No, not even as simple friend," she replied.

"There is no use in denying what all the world

knows already that my mother has an uncertain temper, and that it is rather hard to live with her. Nothing but the most complete self-control. as well as the most careful attention to her wishes and avoidance of all that she dislikes, would help me through at all; and nothing but the knowledge that it is for my boy's future would make me endure it. So far I will speak frankly. But I am simply on sufferance; and I have no more power at home than if I were a paid companion—and indeed not quite so much, for then at least I should have the power of leaving. I dare not ask any one to come and see me—not you, nor Stella Branscombe, nor old Colonel Moneypenny"-"I am glad she calls him old," thought Sandro-" nor Hortensia Lyon; in fact no one. I am of course always glad to see you-or Stella, or any one," she added hurriedly, as a check on the sudden brightness that flashed into his face; "but I should not be glad to see any of you often, for that would made my life more uncomfortable than it is already and would react in greater harshness on my boy. So that you see," she said, and now she looked at him frankly; "I am just as unable to have a friend who would be of real use to me—a friend in any true intimacy whether man or woman, as to have a husband."

"But this miserable existence—this awful slavery—who but you could bear it!" he cried. "You can, because you are an angel—the one perfect woman of creation!"

"Because I am a cold-blooded calculator," she answered lightly; "and pride myself on my common sense and reasonableness. only one of two things to be done in life, Mr. Kemp," she added, turning to him with a strange air of confidence—had he been vain he would have given it a warmer name; "Break or Bear. What we cannot bear with patience let us break with resolution; but when we cannot do this and must endure, what folly to make things worse by fretting and repining! Six years ago I broke my bonds, as you know; but I had to come back to them again, and under harder terms. Now I cannot break them again, save under conditions which do not present themselves; so I have made up my mind to bear them, if they last my whole lifetime. There is nothing else to be done; don't you see that?"

"I see that you are the noblest woman living," he answered in a suffocated voice; "and that poverty is a greater curse than I have ever felt it before. If it had not been for that miserable old godfather of mine I should have been rich, like my brothers—given a profession that

would have ensured me an income, and left equal with the rest by my father's will. My whole life has been sacrificed to a lying promise—a delusive hope! And now for the first time I know its full bitterness—the real meaning of the curse!"

"Let that pass," she answered quickly. "You cannot alter your position any more than I can alter mine; and you too must bear with the dignity of patience what hurts and galls you in your life—as also must I. We are friends in fact, though we cannot say so to the world. Besides, why should we?" she said, taking back her light and careless manner. "There is no such solemn compact in two people liking to talk to each other when they chance to meet, and on the whole feeling more esteem and sympathy for each other than not. This is the sum total of our friendship—not a very formidable affair, when we think of it!"

- "More than this," he pleaded.
- "No more. This is all," she returned.
- "You can give me no more than this? You would give as much to a mere acquaintance."
- "I can have only mere acquaintances," she answered. "I have told you that my mother will not allow me to have more."
 - "Not even a friend, such I would be-humble,

sincere, devoted, asking only the privilege of serving you and of being sometimes useful, and always faithful?"

He spoke as if his very life depended on her answer. With the natural contradiction of human nature, the clearer her path, the firmer her decision, the more reluctant he was to follow the one or accept the other.

Again the widow looked across the brawling river to the green and quiet pastures beyond. Her soft face took a half dreaming, half yearning, look, and her grey eyes were dark and tender. Then with an effort she seemed to come back to herself, to reality, to resolution, to strength.

"Impossible!" she said firmly. "Such a friendship would be my ideal of life, my all of happiness; but it is utterly and entirely impossible! Never let us speak of it again. It would be cruel on your part and weak on mine. We know where we stand; and anything else, as I have said, is impossible." Rising, she called out to the child: "Come, my Tony, we must be going home, my little man. It is your teatime."

"And is this the last time I shall ever see you alone?" asked Sandro feverishly.

"That depends on accident," she answered

with well-feigned tranquillity. "We do not often stumble over each other like this—do we?"

"If I knew your habits—when and where it was most likely to meet you!" he returned.

She looked at him a little reproachfully.

"To be soon the talk of Highwood?" she said. "No. When things have to be done, the only rational way is to do them thoroughly. I have given myself to my child and I must think only of what is best for him. To have it said that his mother was a flirting widow who walked abroad with gentlemen, would never do! And you would be sorry to be the cause of this."

"Unless——" he began.

She stopped him with her eyes, they were so calm and clear and icy.

"There can be no unless," she said quietly. "I have my duty marked out for me, and my path is too clearly traced to miss, except by wilful wrong-doing. I have to live for my boy; to do what is best for his future and to forego all that might be pleasant to me if it should be hurtful to him. Do you not see this? Yes. I know that you do. So good-bye."

She held out her hand. To judge by her manner only, this interview had told him nothing, and these last words had cost her no effort.

"Good-bye," said Sandro, not so steadily as she had spoken. Then he added impulsively: "Let me give you this sketch. It will be a little memento of our talk to-day; and this talk has fixed the boundaries of my life."

"Yes; give it me," she answered.

As she spoke she drew her veil over her face and turned away her head. When she turned back again the gauze was wet, but she said in a light, hard, mocking tone:

"A study of rocks suits me exactly! You know the contempt I have for softness and sentimentality and how I prize strength and self-control! Good-bye!"

Once more their hands met but not their eyes. The widow was looking at her boy, that set smile again on her lips; and Sandro, looking at her almost as one looks at a dear face dead, felt as if she had suddenly left his world and had gone to some other sphere where he could not follow her and might not reclaim her to his own.

"Good-bye," he said mournfully; "and God bless you. If ever you want me you know where I stand, and how much you can rely on me!"

"Come, my little man!" said the widow in a strained unnatural voice. "Wish Mr. Kemp good-bye, and come home to tea."

"Ask Mr. Kemp to come too," said the child.

She laughed in a harsh odd way.

"That would never do!" she said. "Goodnight!" she added as she hurried away before the artist could speak.

When well out of sight she suddenly stopped and kneeling on the ground took the child in her arms, kissing him with feverish fervour.

"Tell me that you love me, Tony!" she said, holding him to her.

"I love you," repeated the boy, patting her face. "Dear, sweet, pretty mamma, I love you so much—but, oh, mamma, pretty mamma, you are crying! What are you crying for? Has Mr. Kemp hurt you? Let me go back and beat him."

"No," she said, mastering herself with an effort; "Mr. Kemp has not hurt me and I am not crying now, Tony. See! I am quite well again, and nothing is the matter," she added, laughing spasmodically. "And now let us run a race, and see who will get to that gate the first!"

CHAPTER VIII.

HIS BETTER CHANCES.

MEANWHILE Sandro Kemp went back to his old old attitude and occupation—leaning against the bole of the elm-tree while sketching the rocks, covered above watermark with flowers and tender seedlings, by which the calmer sweep of the river was broken into those thousand tossed and troublous cascades. It was an emblem of his life, he said to himself; and he did well to fix the lines which should remind him of his broken hopes, his tranquillity and peace destroyed for ever; all because of that sweet, fair woman whom he loved so well, and, as she had made him understand, so hopelessly.

He knew now his fate; unless, indeed, a greater share of success should come to him than he dared to hope. Yet if his wildest dreams should indeed be realized!—if that palace for the cotton-lord should be given him?

—and that other great chance, that grand cathedral for which he was now planning and studying and striving? Well! he should then be famous, and on the high-road to wealth as the result. But would it not still be wealth of that uncertain kind which depends on the life of the breadwinner? And would Augusta change the certainty of her inheritance for the mere chances of one man's life?

Were she alone in the world, and had she not already made trial of the same kind of thing—then he might hope and believe; but with her little son, and after what she had said, it seemed, indeed, impossible! If her husband, the Professor, had lived long enough to perfect his great work, he too would have been wealthy and world-renowned: but he died before he had proved his theory, before he had consolidated his fame and by that consolidation turned it into enduring cash; and who could tell but that the same fate should not overtake himself? Still, he would not be craven although he was hopeless. He would work as steadily for her friendly approbation and for his own selfrespect as if he might still have hoped for her love and its rich reward. The sunshine had gone out of his life, but he would not whimper because it was prematurely night.

All the same, he felt as if he had suddenly lost his way somehow; as if his life had fallen asunder and he had to reconstruct it out of the fragments; as if something had died and some one had left him; and as if the spur which had pricked forward his ambition had become blunt and useless.

He made his sketch however, with the conscientious care characteristic of all his work—yet how sombre in tone and low in key, how mournful in spirit that pictured story of the rocks!—and then he put up his materials and went slowly back to the little cottage where he had made his home.

It was only a six-roomed cottage, but it was one of the prettiest little places in the neighbourhood. Set on a slight eminence, it commanded a view of the whole rich valley, with the winding river that ran so rapidly to the sea—that sea itself ruling the horizon with a narrow line of shining silver—while to the back the wild and picturesque fell-country was rounded off as by a frame by the blue heights of the distant mountains. The small town of Highwood lay clustered in the hollow; and the houses of the gentry, each standing in its islet of green, whether of park, of garden, or of leafy wood, broke up the monotony of the pasture-

lands which were the chief wealth of the vale. The garden of this little cottage—Fernacres, as it was called—was famous for its roses, its carnations, its pansies, and its early fruit and vegetables. Both Sandro and his landlord—James Prinsep, the schoolmaster—spent a great deal of their spare time in this little plot of ground; and the result was more than satisfactory. Fernacres was ahead of even the grandest places in the valley; and the finest flowers grown in the open air, as well as the first dish of peas, of strawberries, and of new potatoes, were sure to come from this sunny little slope.

Mrs. Prinsep had been a lady's maid at Rose Hill—Jane Durnsford's predecessor; and she had added to a naturally gentle and refined nature the lessons in grace and moral culture given her by contact with Mrs. Branscombe. She was one of the true ladies of womanhood; and lady enough not to be ashamed of domestic work. Hence she kept the place in the most exquisite cleanliness and order; she cooked to perfection; and she made her lodger as happy as any poor bachelor whose thoughts are running on the unattainable, can be. It was altogether the most modest kind of home that could be imagined for a man in the prime of life; but

it suited Sandro Kemp when he first entered on it; and he had gone on with it longer than he originally intended because of those grey eyes and fair hair, that soft face, sweet voice and strange combination of gentleness and will which sometimes he was able to see, either at The Laurels, or elsewhere.

As he came home now from his sketching expedition by the river, Mrs. Prinsep, watching for him from the window of her own little parlour—that which corresponded to his, on the other side of the door—noticed how pale he looked and how heavily he walked.

"He studies too much," said the kindly woman with a sigh.

Those boards and queer implements—T squares, compasses and the like—those flimsy sheets of yellowish and transparent paper, with their black and red lines, their squares and hieroglyphics—those wonderful pictures of houses and churches and nondescript buildings, with scales of measurement and more hieroglyphics underneath were sore trials to her patience as a housekeeper and to her sympathies as a woman. She longed to dust that writing-table against the window where Sandro kept this professional litter; but this was the one sacred space which no profane hand must

invade; and the poor woman was forced to let alone all those smeared little saucers of red and black and blue—all those messed plates and dust-covered sheets of paper and parchment;—contenting herself with supplying clean tumblers of fresh water and sometimes going the length of dusting about the free corners.

If this were a trial to her housewifely pride of order her lodger's habits and hours touched her womanly sympathies quite as much. Over and over again, hours and hours after she and her husband had gone to bed, she had heard Sandro's footfall on the stairs, and had struck a light to see the hour. Two, three, and even past three it had been—and he hard at work all that time with his houses and churches! No wonder that he looked pale at times; or that at times he was so silent and sad she had half a mind to ask him what ailed him. He was just killing himself with overwork; and apparently to not much good. He was as poor now as he was when he first came there. Though he paid her punctually and did not owe a penny in the town, her fine woman's wit told her that he had not sixpence to spare from the bare necessaries of life; and to toil as he did, early and late, for no good, was what she could scarcely call good sense:—though it was Mr. Kemp

who did it; and, save her own James, Mr. Kemp was to her mind the best man that ever lived and the most of a gentleman. Mr. Branscombe was as fine as if he were a prince; and their dear good rector, in whose house she had also lived—her first place as nurse-girl—was the best clergyman that could be; but Mr. Kemp had something in him better than either. She did not know what it was exactly, she only felt it; and as he had no mother to see to his things, and no sister to live with him as his companion, Mrs. Prinsep thought herself consecrated to the task of taking care of him. And she fulfilled her self-imposed mission as few would have done.

"I am afraid your dinner will be a little spoilt, Mr. Kemp," she said, coming to meet him in the narrow slip that stood for a hall.

"I know that I am late," he answered with a pleasant smile; "so I cannot blame you, Mrs. Prinsep."

"And there is a letter for you from Rose Hill," continued the schoolmaster's wife. "Mr. Branscombe's own man brought it and seemed put out that you were not at home. He said he was told to bring back an answer."

"Where is the letter?" asked Sandro not very eagerly.

He had liked Mrs. Branscombe sincerely and he admired and liked Stella; but Mr. Branscombe was as antipathetic to him as the traditional oil to vinegar; and though he had defended him when Mrs. Morshead had fallen foul of him, chiefly because of his innate dislike to censure and harsh criticism, yet he took care to keep out of his way as much as he could, and to make his intercourse with Rose Hill one of the rare events of his life. It was a surprise to him then that Mr. Branscombe should have written to him; and he wondered what he could possibly have to say. Nevertheless he was not specially eager to know; and even when Mrs. Prinsep handed him the letter he laid it aside unopened until he should have finished his dinner. But before he had got half-way through his cold beef and salad, the little gate of the garden swung open and the Rose Hill livery of black and silver came up the narrow walk in earnest of the dilettante's impatience.

"Mr. Branscombe has sent for an answer, sir, to his letter," said Mrs. Prinsep, coming into the room.

"By George! I had forgotten all about it and have not opened it yet," said the artist, tearing at the envelope—which was blackbordered to such a depth as to leave scarcely room for the address. He found inside the sketch of a monument in vile perspective and worse taste; with a letter from Mr. Branscombe, begging him to undertake this small commission, and put into workable form the crude ideas hastily jotted down on the enclosure. If Mr. Kemp would do Mr. Branscombe the favour of coming to see him at Rose Hill, say, this evening—or to-morrow morning, if that would suit him better—they might be able to confer together on the mournful subject of this communication and perhaps come to an understanding more quickly than they could do by letter.

To which Mr. Sandro Kemp returned for answer a short note, written in the third person as Mr. Branscombe's had been, saying that he would do himself the pleasure of waiting on him this evening.

"I will not give him my best working-hours in the morning," he said to himself; "and I am too much out of trim to-night to do any good at home; else that Cathedral ought not to stand even for this. Still it will be pleasant to design something good and beautiful for the dear woman. And Augusta Latrobe will see it."

After which he continued his dinner, the vision of a simple, touching and well-composed monument gradually clearing itself in his mind, in direct opposition to the florid and meretricious composition, all of cherubs' heads and angels with trumps and inverted torches, of broken columns wreathed with flowers and crowns and crosses at the base, which represented Mr. Branscombe's idea of a fitting memorial to his good Matilda so "sorrowfully departed this life."

"We shall disagree, of course," said the artist again to himself. "But unless he will give me carte blanche I will not undertake the thing at all. I will not put my brains into such stuff as this, to make it in any way workable!" he added, with a second contemptuous glance at the sketch enclosed. "Not a line right; not an idea that has not been worked to death; and the whole thing just one heterogeneous jumble of horrors!"

As he said this, aloud this time, the gardengate swung back for the second time and the postman came to the door. They had a double post at Highwood, and the evening letters were often the most important of the day. Mrs. Prinsep brought in two. One was large and official, the other was in an unknown hand;

but the post-mark was the London S.W., where his eldest brother lived.

He opened the first, knowing that in it was contained his fate so far as the cotton-lord's palace was concerned. For a moment he held his breath and Mrs. Prinsep, taking away the dinner-things, could not help noticing that he turned deadly pale. Then the colour came back in a flood on his face, and his brightest smile flashed over it like sunlight, as he lifted up his eyes to Mrs. Prinsep watching him so tenderly, and for need of some one to share his gladness called out: "Well, Mrs. Prinsep, you are to keep me for a little while longer yet! I have that house at Hillside to build!"

"I am glad of that, sir," she answered smiling. "I should be sorry to lose you now that you have been with us so long. And it is a good thing for you too, is it not, sir?"

"Yes;" he said with a happy, boyish laugh. "It is a very good thing, Mrs. Prinsep. I shall have to give you that silk gown I promised you. What did we say it was to be—blue or green?"

"No, no, Mr. Kemp! You are to do nothing of the kind," she said, also laughing for sympathy. She checked herself in an instant. Her dear former mistress—her ever good and generous friend—had been buried only yesterday; and this was not the time for what her Scotch aunt would have called "daffing."

"And I shall not wear colours for a year to come," she added gravely. "Mrs. Branscombe was one of my greatest losses."

"Then it shall be black silk," said Sandro, also gravely; "and you are a good, true-hearted, affectionate creature."

After this he opened his second letter, and found it to be from his brother's housekeeper—the three Kemp men were unmarried—saying that her master was ill but that he was not to be alarmed; not much was the matter, and if he got worse she would let Mr. Sandro know. He had had an accident in the park; had been thrown from his horse which had rolled on him and hurt his chest; but though he could not write, because his arm was powerless, and though he was in bed, there was not much amiss; and Mr. Sandro should hear regularly and need not be uneasy.

"Poor old fellow!" said Sandro, as he read the letter. "I hope he is not much hurt. I wish he had not said so pointedly that I need not bother. I should have so much liked to have seen him. It would not have cost much to have run up to town. But he always means what he says, and I should only annoy him if I went."

And with this he crushed the letter into his pocket and, taking his hat, set out for Rose Hill and the inevitable fight over Mr. Branscombe's "crude ideas."

In this fight Sandro came off victorious. To be sure, he had to be very careful, very cautious, very gentle in his work of demolition; and, while holding fast by the matter of his design, to be wary in his method. For it was a rather hard task, all things considered, to have to tell a wealthy man, intensely vain of his own artistic skill, that his work was all wrong from first to last—the design bad, the drawing worse, the whole thing inadmissible and impracticable—and yet not affront susceptibilities which were wounded as easily as a mimosaplant is made to droop. But Sandro did it. He had that rare mixture of gentleness and frankness which can speak unwelcome truths without offending those who have to hear them: and as Mr. Branscombe had sense enough to understand what was good when he saw it, and as Sandro's hasty sketch made in the studio while the two were conferring, had in it the manifest germ of a grand idea and a great success, he allowed himself to be over-persuaded, and to leave the thing in the more competent hands of the professional artist.

But he indemnified himself for his displacement by saying to Stella and Cyril, when he showed them Sandro's rapid sketch:

"We worked out this between us. Mr. Kemp confessed that my original idea was the grander and more luxuriant conception, but there were certain technical difficulties in the working which made it scarcely feasible. This he considered to be more practicable; and I own I like my second idea almost as well as my first."

"I like it better, sir," said Cyril.

"So do I, papa," said Stella—the poor innocents!

On which Mr. Branscombe answered a little peevishly:

"I cannot say much for your taste, my dear Stella—as for you, Cyril, I know that you have no more artistry in you than a log. The original idea was infinitely the better of the two, and, as I explained to you, was abandoned solely because of certain technical difficulties in the working out."

"Whatever you do, papa, is beautiful," said Stella, going up to him and kissing him. "How I wish that mamma could have seen it!"

she added naïvely, tears coming into her eyes at the mention of her mother's name.

"She will; and she will know that she is honoured," said Mr. Branscombe pompously.

The phrase jarred on Cyril strangely and involuntarily he uttered an exclamation which meant a disclaimer both of the sentiment and the manner of uttering it.

"What an odd thing to say!" he thought.

"That father-in-law of mine has certainly some queer corners in his mind. He is as unlike my Stella and her beloved mother as if he were of another race; and I am glad that my Stella is more her mother's child than his."

On his side, Mr. Branscombe, who had heard that "Oh!" thought—for so elegant a man a little savagely: "You have very nearly come to the end of your tether, young man; and this inconvenient farce has to be hissed off the boards!"

CHAPTER IX.

HER FATHER.

It had to be done. Therefore, argued Mr. Branscombe, it were well that it should be done at once and while his daughter's heart was more plastic even than usual through grief at her mother's death—that death which was just a week old to-day, closed by the gorgeous funeral which had given the neighbourhood its solemn fête the day before yesterday.

The moment was favourable and the hour had come. Cyril had ridden over to the county town on a planned errand, simulating "business at the bank" for Mr. Branscombe. Thus he was safely disposed of for the afternoon. His absence would enable his prospective father-in-law to lay down the lines of the future without fear of interruption; and Mr. Branscombe knew that Stella would keep to those lines when he had once made it clear to her that

they represented his will. He counted on her filial fidelity, cost what it might, and that she would make her action coincident with his desire, subservient to his advantage, even at her own loss and martyrdom. Among the multiform chances of life his daughter's rebellion to his command, or indifference to his wishes, was the last which the mind of Mr. Branscombe could entertain.

He foresaw that Cyril would be more difficult to manage; but, with Stella on his side, the young fellow's force of resistance would be reduced to a minimum. If a farce has to be hissed off the boards, he thought, looking at himself in the glass and sadly noting the crow's feet about his eyes, of what good the actors' refusal to budge? They must go; the public will not hear them.

"And in this matter I am the public," said Mr. Branscombe aloud; "and this undesirable engagement is the farce that has to be hissed off the stage of my life. Stella is too useful to me now to be parted with; and India is an unhealthy climate. I am doing my duty to her as well as to myself; and in time she will recognize this and thank me."

On which he lowered the blind so as to make a mournful and subdued light in the room; put himself into a becoming attitude of grief and dejection; rang the bell with plaintive softness; and, when the man came asked him quite deferentially to desire Miss Branscombe to come to him for a moment if she had the time to spare. It was all the "business" of the actor at the side-scenes, preparing himself for his entrance.

"Ah! my good child! my dear Stella!" he said with a caressing accent and affectionate gesture, as the girl came into the room at his summons, her face pale for her sad thoughts on this, the first terrible week-day commemoration of her mother's death—her slender figure looking almost shrunken in her plain, unornamented black—her whole air one of unutterable sorrow and the evidence of loss.

She went up to him and put her arms round his neck, as she laid her cheek tenderly on his forehead.

"Dear, darling papa!" she said with fervour; but her tears fell over his upturned face as she spoke, and Mr. Branscombe thought to himself—"Her state of mind is perfect! I have already conquered all the difficulties."

"Take a chair, my love, and come and sit near me," he said, pressing her hand in recognition of her caress. "I have much to say to you." She looked at him with somewhat of a startled look. What could he have to say to her, prefaced in this strangely solemn manner?

"Nothing to which you will not agree," he said reassuringly, answering her startled look.

"No, I am sure of that," returned Stella fondly—more fondly even than usual, her father representing to her now not only himself but also her beloved mother.

Indeed, who would not agree with that adored being, so good and noble and gifted and superior altogether as he was? Certainly not Stella his idolizing daughter brought up in the faith of his perfectness as she had been, and a firm believer in the quasi divinity to which her life had been subordinate and her mother's sacrificed.

"We have been terribly and rudely shaken, my child," began Mr. Branscombe, looking up to the ceiling. "We have sustained a loss to which, my Stella, words can give neither expression nor dimension."

"Indeed, yes," said Stella simply, her tears still falling softly down her face. "Life will never be the same now without poor mamma. We have lost the best part of it."

"I have lost more than the best part of mine," said her father mournfully. "I have lost all that soothed my sorrows and made my many sufferings endurable; and now I have only my little daughter left to me—the Star of my Home, my Stella."

"Dearest papa!" said the girl, looking at him fondly, yet wondering in her own mind what were those sorrows, those sufferings, to which he so darkly alluded. "I cannot supply mamma's place with you," she went on to say, speaking with extreme tenderness; "but you know how much I love you. Do you not?"

"I hope it. I believe it. Were it not so, I should have nothing more for which to live—for you and I, my Stella, stand now alone in this cold, cruel world. Hand in hand we stand together—we two alone—the desolate widower, the motherless daughter."

"And Cyril with us, papa," said Stella.

"Cyril? Aye, Cyril! But Cyril is not of our blood, my little girl. Cyril has not lost what we have lost," said her father with a certain fine disdain that seemed to mean intensity of love for the poor, dear dead wife and mother rather than any want of faith in, or appreciation of, the boy himself. "Cyril is a Ponsonby, not a Branscombe," he continued. "We two Branscombes stand alone, as I have said; and we must comfort one another."

"Yes, papa, indeed I will do all I can to comfort you," said Stella, taking his tone and wide of his meaning.

"I knew that! I knew that, my good child," he answered, as one allowing himself to be soothed by loving assurance. "The spirit of your sainted mother lives in you. I knew that I could count on my child."

"So you can on Cryil, quite as much as on me," said Stella, faithful to her two vital affections and still blind as to her father's real meaning.

"Cyril is eliminated from our great affliction, my dear," was his grave reply. "We must do without Cyril in our mutual sorrowful consolations."

"We cannot do without Cyril, papa," said Stella.

Her father might as well have said that she and Cyril were to do without him.

"I think we shall have to learn that difficult lesson," was his reply, made quite quietly—without any accent of sarcasm, any show of aggressiveness—as if he were saying the most ordinary thing in the world and not what to Stella sounded the most extraordinary, the most impossible. "I think we shall have to do without Cyril, both you and I," he repeated with elegant persistence.

- "How can we?" said Stella wonderingly.
 "He belongs to us now. He is one of us."
- "Not quite one of us just yet," her father answered dryly. "Unless, indeed, you have been married, my dear, unknown to me."

"Papa, what a dreadful thing to say!" inter-

polated Stella, profoundly shocked.

- "As such an hypothesis is inadmissible," he continued quietly; "you cannot prove in any way that Cyril is one of us, or that he belongs to us. A mere fiancé is not one of the family in esse, he is only a potential member, a circumstance in posse, and can still be relegated to that open space which lies beyond the house door. Is it not so?"
- "I do not quite understand what you mean, darling," said Stella softly.
- "No? Yet I think I speak plainly, my love. Have you never heard of an engagement between two young people being broken off, my innocent little girl? Are all betrothals necessarily consolidated by a marriage?"
- "Papa, what do you mean?" cried Stella, looking at him with as much wonder as dismay. "You cannot mean that I am to give up Cyril?—that I am not to marry him? Oh, dear, dear, papa!—good, noble-hearted, beloved papa, say that I am mistaken, and that you do not

mean this! I cannot believe it! Say that I am mistaken!"

She rose from her chair, her face wild with terror, her hands clasped nervously before her, her usually melodious voice now sharpened by fear and flung up into almost a scream of pain.

Mr. Branscombe shuddered and covered his face in his hands.

"Oh, my head! my head!" he cried in a voice of suffering. "My child, how can you be so cruel as to ask me to bear all the torture of this loud excitement, this undisciplined passion! My nerves cannot endure it! Is it not enough that I have lost the tenderest wife that ever breathed—the most beloved partner of my bosom, and cherished companion in my studies and pursuits, - but must you, my daughter, turn the knife in my wound and agonize me afresh by this terrible display of uncontrolled excitement! I, who love all that is gentle and low-voiced and subdued in a woman, to have a daughter who raves like a maniac—and she the daughter of the gentlest soul that ever breathed, the most precions saint that ever lived on earth in human form! Monstrous, oh monstrous! most monstrous and unnatural!" he said in the voice in which he was wont to recite his metrical version of Shakespere's King Lear.

"Forgive me, dear papa," said Stella, down at his feet; "I did not mean to hurt you. You know that I would not give you a moment's pain if I could help it. I did not mean to be passionate or wild, but Cyril—my own Cyril—I cannot give up Cyril! How wicked I am to pain you, darling papa—but my poor Cyril! Oh, beloved papa, what can I do for you—and my own Cyril too!"

It was pitiable to see the way in which the poor loyal heart was torn and racked between these two great loves—how the faithful soul was tossed between these two great central fears, that of paining her father by disobedience, and that of breaking Cyril's heart by giving him up as her lover. Turn which way she would she saw only anguish and dismay and disloyalty to one or the other of the two who were as dear to her as life itself. And it had come on her so suddenly! It had been the thunderbolt out of a clear sky, falling without warning cloud or dim foretelling gloom. Her mother's awful death itself had not been more appalling, more unexpected, than this strange announcement of her father's that she must give up her lover. Not half an hour ago and she

felt that her love at least was as safe and solid as the very earth itself; and now had come the earthquake and ruin and desolation everywhere!

"Then you do not love me, Stella? Ah, well, I must inure myself to woe!"

Mr. Branscombe sighed deeply, leaning his glossy well-brushed head with pensive grace on his white and scented hand.

"Yes, papa, I do! I do! You know that I do!" she answered, kneeling down by him as she used to kneel by her mother. "But I love Cyril too. Why may I not keep you both?"

"Impossible, Stella! Impossible, my child! No man can serve two masters, and you must make your choice between us. You cannot have both father and lover—at least not now and in their entirety."

He spoke in a slow, deep measured voice—still the voice in which he was wont to repeat his poetry and which to Stella expressed the ideal of pathos, truth and earnestness.

"Say exactly what you mean and wish, papa," she cried, the look of pain on her face deepening into one of absolute terror. It was almost as if this beloved father, representative of all human nobleness as he was, had suddenly become transformed and had taken on himself something strange and dreadful—as if the

guardian angel in whose care she had trusted—the god whose grace she had prayed to win and thought to have found—had turned from her with an angry countenance, and had become her cruel enemy and her implacable judge.

"I mean, my dear, that you must postpone your marriage with this young man; at least for the immediate present," said Mr. Branscombe, softening his voice but thinking it as well to go straight to the point and spare further agonies of doubt.

"Not marry him in August?" asked Stella. "Cyril will wait," she added. "There is no need to marry till he has received his appointment and just before he sails. I am sure he will wait," she said, speaking as if a load had been taken from her, and as she spoke, laying her hand in her father's with a fond, almost protecting gesture.

"And you would break my heart in September say, if you refrain from doing so in August?" he answered reproachfully. "You would leave me, Stella, in my terrible loneliness while you made your own happiness with another?—and leave me with such unnecessary haste," he added in a low voice. "I shall soon die!" he sighed, laying his hand on his heart. "My days are numbered. Would you advance

by so much the fatal hour?—you, my daughter, my Stella!"

"Papa! you are not ill, are you? I did not know that you were ill," cried Stella, kissing his hands as this new fear overwhelmed her with

fresh agony.

"Cyril is young," continued Mr. Branscombe, not heeding the interruption or the caresses, and only careful to work the profitable vein on which he had struck. "You will not have long to wait. My days, my Stella, will not be many, for my heart is broken and my health destroyed for ever. I ask you only to stay with meyour only parent now !-- for the few months, or even weeks it may be, remaining to me; -not to leave me to be tended by hirelings in my last hours;—to stay with me, my child, and close my eyes when I shall depart to her whom we both love and who has already gone. I should like to have your sweet face about my dying pillow—the last thing on which my failing sight should rest! I should like to go straight from my own dear child on earth to the sainted spirit of her mother in heaven—from my earthly Stella to my soul's best purified star!"

He said all this with mournful eyes delicately wet and again raised devoutly to the ceiling of the room. His air of poetic resignation and elegant despair would have been transparent enough to all but a child who had been born and brought up in the faith of filial worship and the belief in paternal perfection. But it told with Stella as he meant it to tell. Her critical faculty had never dared to plumb nor measure her father's sincerity.

"Papa! papa! do not talk like this!" she cried, weeping passionately. "It breaks my heart to hear you."

"Mine is broken already," said Mr. Branscombe with that pathetic patience, that quiet resignation to despair and pensive allusion to unknown burdens which touches the sympathies of the young more deeply than anything in the world beside.

"No, no, papa! You have years of life and beautiful work before you. Years, years," she said, clinging to him.

"Oh, my sweet, fond, trustful child, how youth and love deceive themselves!" he answered, stroking her hair with tender love—the melancholy caress of illimitable sorrow. "A very few months will see the light of this world quenched for me and my eyes opened to the glories above. See! I ask so little from you, my Stella!" he went on to say in a pleading voice that was to his daughter as if a king had knelt

at the feet of a beggar. "For what do I sue? Only that you should hold my hand during that fateful passage of my soul—only that you should sit by my bedside while I pass away—receive my last sigh, and close my eyes when I am gone! Is this so much to demand from out the rich treasure of a daughter's love?—so much to take from a long life of happiness as a tribute to a father's worth? In a very short time I shall be in the grave and you will be free to marry your young husband. I shall be out of your path and you will have no obstruction to your wishes. It will not last long, my Stella—not long! not long! The year of your mourning for your beloved mother will not have passed before I, your father, am laid by her side. And during that year of mourning would you invest yourself in all your bridal array and forget her who gave you life in the mad pleasure of the world, the giddy round of bridal festivities? I cannot think so meanly of my Stellaof her mother's child!"

"Papa! all that you say seems so sad, and so beautiful while you speak—but Cyril! poor poor Cyril!" said Stella, weeping afresh.

"Choose then as your heart dictates," said Mr. Branscombe very tenderly and in the manner of one who suddenly abandons all argument, all

persuasion. "I would put no force on you. If I do not win the little sacrifice I have demanded from the plentitude of your love and with the approbation of your conscience, I do not want it from any other motive. Marry then, my Stella, and be happy. I will do my best without you—do my best to find my comfort in the knowledge of your young joy, and to bear with the dignity of a man and the resignation of a Christian the disappointment of my hopes, the wreck of my love and the few days of sorrow still left to me. But, oh God!" he cried with a burst of anguish; "that it should have come to this! that my child, my own beloved and idolized child-my Star, my little Stella-should desert me for a stranger and make her happiness out of my despair!"

He turned away, then suddenly crossed his arms on the table, laid his head on them as if bowed down with anguish, and burst into a passionate flood of tears.

"Papa! darling dearest beloved papa—do not cry! do not be so unhappy!" said Stella, trying to force his face from his arms; but the paternal spine was strong and she could not stir it. "Papa, you are breaking my heart!" she continued. "Look up, dearest papa! do look at me! Oh, I cannot bear this!" she said, as his

tears and convulsive sobs grew heavier and more agonized. "I would rather die than see you like this. Papa! dear papa, I will not leave you! Look up, and do not break my heart in this dreadful way! I cannot bear it! Papa, hear me—I will not marry to leave you alone!"

The die was cast; her promise registered; her father had won the game.

"God bless you, my beloved child!" he sobbed, as he lifted up his face and took the girl to his heart. "Now I know my daughter once more—the Star of my Home—my one sole treasure left!"

"Only be happy, darling papa, and I shall not mind for anything," cried Stella, strung for the moment by the exaltation of her martyrdom to the poetry and nobleness of sacrifice. Then the smoke of the incense cleared and the flame died down as she remembered all that this martyrdom included. "My poor Cyril! I have broken your heart!" she sobbed.

Crushed down by her pain she sank at her father's well-shod, dainty feet, as a devotee might have sunk before the altar of Moloch when the decree of passing one beloved through the fire had gone forth.

"My love," said her father, raising her and

kissing her forehead with paternal solemnity; "you have been Cyril's good angel in that you have given him an opportunity for the exercise of spiritual grace, for which he ought to bless and thank you on his knees. It is not every day that such grand moments come into our lives. Our best benefactor is he who allows us occasion for the cultivation of our highest nature and our noblest self."

And Stella, in her innocence, did not turn the mirror round, nor ask herself why, if it were such a boon that Cyril should have this occasion of spiritual grace through the gift of sorrowthis opportunity of virtue and the cultivation of his highest self by the way of sacrifice—it had not been as valuable for her father? Surely—if she had dared to reflect and been able to see—it would have been more in accordance with his professed system of self-culture, had he appropriated to himself this opportunity of ethical improvement instead of giving it to another who would not value it. A young fellow like Cyril, content to live on that unidealized moral plane where to speak the truth and have no fear of man, to be brave and loyal, cheerful and generous, sincere in soul and pure in heart, considerate for others and self-respectful for himself, made about the sum of his private

decalogue, was not likely to be grateful for this kind of supersensual martyrdom, nor indeed very likely to profit by it. Many a man's morality has been wrecked before now by such a trial as this; and Cyril had yet to prove the quality of his, and show by experience whether it would bear the strain put on it by Mr. Branscombe, or break down under it with hopeless ruin and collapse.

But the poor girl thought none of these things. She was not near the region of clear-sighted understanding where her father was concerned. And by her blindness her pain was lessened by at least one pang in that she did not suspect the hollowness of all these high sounding principles for which she suffered—in that she had not dared to imagine that her god was only a mountebank playing a part on a gilded stage—or that the dazzling veil of her prophet hid deformity not superhuman radiance and beauty. Her father was still to her the Supreme; and in obeying him she was emphatically obeying the higher law and doing her noblest duty.

All the same her heart was sore for her young lover and for herself, and the anguish of her martyrdom was hard to bear.

CHAPTER X.

FRIENDS IN COUNCIL.

NATURALLY it was more difficult to convince Cyril than it had been to persuade Stella, that this renunciation of the lover in favour of the father was righteous, just and holy. And the young fellow had to run the gauntlet of many well-delivered blows because he could not see, and would not acknowledge, that father's superior claims. He had to submit to the accusations of selfishness and egoism—according to the invariable rule of the selfish and egoisticof inability to rise to the sublime height of Duty, that stern Voice of God which we ought all to obey like little children at the mother's knee—of moral coarseness—and finally of greed; Stella's portion, coming to her through her mother, being of manifest importance to a man whose sole actual inheritance that he could touch

and handle was just one hundred and fifty pounds a year.

And when Mr. Branscombe blew this poisoned little needle from between his fine, thin, mobile lips he did more execution with it than with any other he had used; as indeed he had foreseen; and by making Cyril furiously angry he put him in the wrong, and forced him to apologize.

On his part Mr. Branscombe was as cool as an ice-cave in a glacier. All these hard things were said with the quietest and most gentlemanlike air of philosophic impartiality possible to be imagined. Not a trace of passion on his side reduced the question to one of individual antagonism or lowered the lofty standard of abstract morality by which he measured the right and wrong of the proposition. His accusations were all based on fact not feeling, and were capable of mathematical demonstration; and when he said things which were as hard as iron and as sharp as steel, his voice was so calm, his intonation so melodious, his manner so refined, that Cyril was often more bewildered than indignant.

More than once he asked himself with boyish doubt of his own heart, had Mr. Branscombe really the nobler insight, and was he himself

just a headstrong youth, governed solely by selfish passion and incapable of a higher morality? Yet he could not quite come to this view of himself, try as hard as he would to be honest and candid, and for all that he was to some degree infected by the family cult paid to the family Apollo. He could not quite confess that he was so much of a low-minded ruffian as Mr. Branscombe made out—always by logical deduction from general principles, and when the sense of a wordy periphrase had to be crystalized into an adjective and a noun-because he wanted to marry Stella, according to their engagement, even though this marriage should take her from her father. It was the law of life, he argued. Birds leave their nests and sons their mothers; daughters make new homes for themselves with other sons taken from other mothers; and so the thing goes on all the world over. What then was there specially shameful and ignoble in this very natural desire of his to make Stella his wife according to her promise? Grant that it did include her elegant father's domestic loneliness—that it necessitated a housekeeper and perhaps an amanuensis—some one must suffer; and Cyril, strong in youth and love and all the hope of his great joy, did not see why that some one should be himself. No, doing his best to be candid, he could not see it—though certainly not for want of Mr. Branscombe's strenuous and unabashed efforts to enlighten him.

Meanwhile between the two poor Stella was morally in the position of those savage brides who, carried off with violence by their husbands and defended with brutality by their kinsmen, run great risk of being torn to pieces between those who try to take and those who will not let go. It was a terrible position for her in truth!—and her heart was nearly broken in her endeavour to reconcile these two irreconcilable affections, to obey these two opposing duties.

When Cyril, with all a young lover's passionate despair, besought her to keep her engagement and marry him as she had promised; when he urged on her his love, his sorrow, his ruined life, the sacredness of her vows, the destruction of his whole future if she fell away from him, and clinched all by appeals to her dead mother's memory and reminders of how she had always countenanced and upheld this love—the poor girl felt that this was indeed her duty, this her truest religion, and that nothing ought to stand between her and his rescue from destruction. When her father in his measured, mournful voice spoke in poetic language of his

broken heart, his speedy death of which he was sorrowfully certain; and yet why should it be sorrowful?—would it not be his release, and her recovery of freedom?—when he reminded her that the sacrifice which he asked of her was only for so short a time; when he compressed the whole thing into an antithesis—so little to lose and so much to give; when he, too, spoke of her mother up there in heaven, she whose whole life had been one of love and duty and devotion to him, and whose example should be her guide—then her heart turned to him, to this poor papa who was so good, so beautiful, so superior, such a genius; and she felt that Cyril must be patient and consent to wait cheerfully, as she had promised. It was only right and just. They were young and poor papa was not. They owed more to him than to each other; and they could be true and faithful and loving even though they were not to be married just yet. It was their duty. Sacrifice is nobler than self-seeking. They must forego their happiness now that they might take it with a clearer conscience when the time for it should come naturally and without wrong-doing.

Slowly the oscillating balance of her mind inclined more and more this way. Her promise,

always insisted on by her father, had already been given as we know. Gradually it became clear as daylight to her that this was the right thing to do-the thing which the higher law commanded and which her mother would have approved. She forgot that mother's anxiety that the marriage should take place even before the day originally fixed on. She had not understood the true significance of her desire then, and she saw it no more clearly now. She only remembered the one great lesson of her life, and by this she sought to shape her own. And as she grew more convinced of the righteousness of her renunciation she found that strength which comes from distinctness of belief, and was able to stand with less turmoil of soul by her desolating decision.

It made no difference to her when Augusta Latrobe, at Cyril's prayer, came to Rose Hill to urge his claims and advise her to marry despite her father's words and her own promise. Poor Cyril! it was once more, as so often before, the straw caught at by the drowning man. He remembered Mrs. Latrobe's kind manner and odd advice in the conservatory, before the awful catastrophe of Mrs. Branscombe's death had thrown all into such dire confusion, and he went to The Laurels as almost the last chance

left him. Fortunately for him, he met her just as she was leaving the house with her boy, for their afternoon's walk. For Mrs. Morshead, though rich, would not allow her daughter to have either a maid for herself or a nurse for the boy. Mothers who had children should look after them themselves, she used to say sourly; and women who chose to go and marry men without sixpence could not expect maids and things when they came back as paupers with families to their old homes.

By meeting her thus alone, Cyril was able to open his heart and ask the fair widow's assistance in the forlorn hope he was leading against Mr. Branscombe, without let or hindrance or spiteful remark from the terrible old woman who was thus kept happily out of the matter.

"I knew it," said Augusta. "I was sure that this would come. I told you as much in the conservatory that day when I advised you to marry—at least this was what I meant. Do you remember?"

"Yes; but I did not understand then what you did mean; and Stella would not have consented to marry me secretly, even if I had asked her," said Cyril.

"No; I know that she would not; for I said much the same to her as I did to you. She

saw no rocks ahead, poor dear! and was half inclined to quarrel with me for my wickedness—only that she is too good to quarrel with any one. I am sorry for you both, Mr. Ponsonby—for you, because the happiness of your youth is destroyed, and for her, because she is sacrificing both you and herself to such a mere bit of humbug as Mr. Branscombe. It is the true given for the untrue."

"Oh!" said Cyril, still under the influence of that family worship.

"Surely you do not mean to say that you believe in Mr. Branscombe?" said Augusta, suddenly stopping and facing the young fellow, her clear grey eyes looking into his with as much amusement as surprise. "The most transparent old humbug in the place!—the merest fop and twaddler flattered into thinking himself a genius! Why, Mr. Ponsonby, you surely do not believe in him?" she said again.

"Up to now I have," he answered.

"And now he shows himself in his true colours as utterly selfish and unfeeling," said Augusta. "But he has done nothing which I, who know him, should not have expected of him."

"He is certainly acting selfishly and cruelly just now," said Cyril. "It is all a puzzle to me."

"To me none, for he is doing only as he has done all his life," answered the widow. Then she added in a voice of inquiry; "I have often wondered what darling Mrs. Branscombe did really think! She was a woman of far too much good sense to be taken in by him I am sure; but how beautifully she behaved! She was never heard to say a word nor seen to look as if she saw through him, as she must have done. I used to think there are more martyrs in life than have gone to the stake when she showed his hideous daubs and played his atrocious music as sweetly as if it had all been true art instead of the awful stuff it is. What an angel she was !—but what a thousand pities that she ever married that wretched creature! He was no more worthy of her than if he had been a Cherokee Indian; and not so much; for a Cherokee Indian would have been at least a man, and Mr. Branscombe is not."

And by the time that Augusta had delivered herself of this last astounding philippic, which made Cyril hot all over, they had come to Rose Hill and her mission of wise counsel began.

She could do nothing. Stella wept as a loving girl naturally would when discussing such a tremendous matter as this sacrifice was to her; but she said that she had thought it all out and had come to this decision as the best if not the happiest thing to do. She had prayed for guidance and she had received the assurance of this direction. It was a terrible trial for them all; but it was right; and her conscience upheld her in her sorrow.

"My dear, nothing in the world is so fallacious as conscience," said that graceless widow whose rule of right was common sense. "Reason the thing out fairly and you will find that common sense is dead against you. Sentiment—and false sentiment too—is all that you have on your side. You have let your mind get heated and excited so that you do not see things as they are. Believe me, you are acting foolishly and wrongly. Remember, you owe something to Cyril as well as to your father; and you made your first promise to him."

"But it is better for Cyril to suffer than to do wrong," said Stella. "He is unhappy now, poor darling, but I am sure that in his heart he feels I am right. He knows that I do not love him less because I feel it to be my duty to keep with poor papa for a few months or years—while he wants me and cannot do without me."

"You will repent it," said Augusta. "And I tell you again that you are acting not only

foolishly but wrongly—as all enthusiasts always do."

"My conscience tells me I am right," said Stella with mournful constancy; and the widow, who was sacrificing her own life's happiness to her idea of duty, knew that it was useless to say more.

It was not by nor for herself that Stella had judged. It was the voice of that Divine guidance which she had prayed for that spoke in her; and she would be doubly criminal were she to be false to its teaching. She loved Cyril better than her life; but not better than God; and love was less than the Divine Will. And by the decree of this Divine Will she owed her first duty to her father. If he forbad the marriage to take place yet awhile, and wanted her to live with him for another year or so, she must obey him. She would be sinful else.

One other person agreed with her; and only one. This was Hortensia Lyon—next to Augusta her greatest friend; perhaps now, when Augusta had gone over so boldly to Mammon and self-seeking, she ought to call her quite her greatest and dearest and nearest! Hortensia—a pretty, large-eyed, delicately-featured little creature with a Puritan air and a Quaker-like head, slender as a willow-wand,

dreamy, unpractical and interpenetrated with moral heroism and the spirit of self-sacrifice—Hortensia upheld her, and said that she was doing grandly, nobly, virtuously. And when we are inclined to one way more than to another, a child's applause will uphold us where the condemnation of a sage will scarcely shake.

Stella was greatly cheered by what Hortensia said. The two together carried the day against Augusta's tinkling cymbal of worldly wisdom; and finally the question was settled. Duty triumphed over love; the way of sacrifice was entered on rather than that of happiness; her father's need was more powerful than her lover's loss; and the desolation of the former was more pitiful than the despair of the latter. Stella turned her face from the pleasant garden where life was to have been one long summer's day of love and joy, and accepted the stony path of virtue and renunciation. The scale of duty settled down firmly and the balance no longer oscillated. She said, "No, we must wait," for the last time: and then the curtain fell on Cyril's departure from High Wood, still engaged but with his marriage indefinitely postponed. At any rate it was postponed until that not far-distant time when Mr. Branscombe should die of his broken heart and secret

malady; as he faithfully promised that he would.

So now there were three broken hearts instead of one. And of these three, Stella was upheld by the consciousness of well doing—Mr. Branscombe had the tremendous strength given by that kind of egoism which justifies itself through belief in its own superiority to all the surrounding world—while Cyril, who had neither the consciousness of well doing nor the strength of egoism to support him, was the victim of both and undeniably the one most to be pitied of the three.

But he neither cut his throat nor had brainfever, as perhaps he should had he been the ideal lover of woman's favourite fancy. He went back to London quietly and like a gentleman; not taking the world into his confidence by any eccentric demonstrations of grief on the platform, yet, all the same, feeling more desolate, more shipwrecked than he once believed he ever could have felt, come what might into his life.

Meanwhile, Stella, listening to her father's poetry and playing over his music at Rose Hill, furtively wiped away the tears that would fall, try as she might to strangle them in her throat before they mounted to her eyes. As Cyril did

not see these tears he could scarcely give her credit for them; and more than once he surprised in himself a certain strain of bitterness when he thought of her choice, and how she had thrown him over for the father whose immense superiority he was beginning to question. But whenever he came face to face with that strain he checked it as if it had been a mortal sin. Whatever else he lost he would not lose his faith in her, he used to say to himself; "the noblest girl in the world," as Hortensia Lyon had called her when finally the coup de grâce had been given to love and all love's sweet fond weakness, and the cross of duty, self-sacrifice and daily martyrdom had been preferred instead. Yes; she was the noblest-minded girl in the world and the dearest, thought poor Cyril with faithful constancy and loving reverence; and whatever happened he would keep this faith as a precious and inalienable amulet.

Alike in the loftiness of their principles, especially so far as these affected Cyril, nothing could be more unlike in character than these two friends, Stella Branscombe and Hortensia Lyon. Stella was as we have seen, preeminently a good girl, conscientious, honourable, dutiful, unselfish; but she was also pre-eminently

natural and human. She liked fun as well as the Miss Pennefathers, say, though her fun was somewhat different from theirs; she had a merry smile and a merry laugh when she did smile and laugh—which she had not done of late; she was by no means indifferent to dress, but thought the choice of a colour, the cut of a sleeve, matters demanding careful consideration; she honoured principles, but she was sweetly weak to persons; in a word she was feminine and concrete, where Hortensia was spiritual and abstract—or rather, it should be said, where Hortensia tried to make herself believe that she was spiritual and abstract.

Hortensia was one of whom those who loved her said she was too good for this world, and those who did not said she gave herself airs, and thought herself better than anybody else. Mr. Branscombe once wrote an Ode in her honour, wherein he compared her to a lily, a daisy, a dove and a fawn; and Mrs. Morshead used to call her "that affected little jade," and express her longing to improve her manners and ways by giving her a good shaking. She was not always quite the same person, having already had various ideals in her mind to which she morally dressed. At present her pose was that of Evangeline and other Puritan maidens

of whom the ideal went to the extreme of selfsuppression; a standard of life so lofty as to be practically unattainable; passionless purity; maidenly reserve; womanly and ennobling in-She was just at the age when girls put out their sensibilities like feelers, trying for their proper pabulum, their appointed path. She talked a great deal of every woman having her assigned mission; and her soul's pain at this moment was, that she had not found hers. She sometimes said that she would make herself a hospital-nurse, and sometimes that she would go to Girton and take honours in classics and mathematics. Sometimes she was all for taking up a neglected district in London, which she would cleanse and purify and make into a little oasis of virtue and modesty by the simple force of her presence, the power of her exhortations. Then she thought she would write a bookonly she did not quite know on what subject, nor how to begin, nor was she always sure of her spelling, while her syntax was decidedly shaky. At another time she talked of going into a school where she should teach girls younger than herself such problems of life and morals as she herself had mastered. Preaching to navvies was a prospect that at one time allured her; keeping a night-school for ploughboys was another; going out to India on the Zenana Mission was one dream of her idle hours; studying medicine was another. It was the seething time of her mental life and she was always in a state of unrest; but she was sincere if rather silly; and she had not yet tried falling in love. Indeed, she proclaimed herself one of nature's vestals, inasmuch as she thought love a very dreadful matter, and girls who liked men very reprehensible and extraordinary. She could not understand how any nice girl could possibly like one man better than all women; and even her old bosom-friend, Stella Branscombe, had dropped down many degrees when first her engagement to Cyril Ponsonby had been made known. By her renunciation she had risen even higher than she stood before; and Hortensia welcomed her back to continued celibacy as a kind of strayed lamb restored to the fold of maidenly right-mindedness. For all this she was not consciously affected; she was only seeking and dissatisfied.

Her present attitude was, as has been said, that of intense quietness of life and moral selfrestraint; and her main mission was to influence her cousin Randolph Mackenzie to take orders. "Woman's rightful work was just this kind of thing," she said. It was influence, not authority; passivity, not action; and to make a splendid fellow of six-feet two content himself with a country curacy, where he would have perhaps three hundred bucolic souls of all ages to look after, was the latest object of her ambition.

It was through this cousin, Randolph Mackenzie, that Cyril Ponsonby had known Highwood and Stella Branscombe. The two young men, the Orestes and Pylades of their set, were fast friends and sworn chums. They had come down to this pretty place on the outskirts of the mountain district for the Long of one year and the Short of another, by which all the mischief had been done and the present sorrow brought about. For if Randolph Mackenzie had not thought his cousin Hortensia an interesting little thing, with all her odd fancies and demureness, he would not have spent his vacations at Highwood and then Cyril would not have known Stella Branscombe; he would not have fallen in love with her, nor would she with him; he would not have gained her parents' consent to a marriage which had more prospective solidity than present brilliancy; he would not have been thrown overboard by Mr. Branscombe when that good Matilda died and the poet and artist wanted to keep Stella to himself; and he would not therefore have been knocking about London at this moment with the sad patience of a man whose life has lost its meaning but to whom no violence nor raving can bring relief; he would not have thought his youth, his strength, his manhood, his health, his ambition of no present avail, and only of future blessing when fate should have comfortably disposed of Mr. Frederick Branscombe and have thus made Stella free.

Meanwhile Hortensia bade her friend be of good cheer. She had done what was right, and the right knows no recoil of sorrow—she had sacrificed herself for her father; and what could she have done better than this?

"She could have married in spite of her father, and that would have been better," said Augusta Latrobe, when Hortensia pronounced her lofty theorem. "She owed it to herself and Cyril Ponsonby; and in my opinion she has been very silly, very weak and absurdly sentimental."

"Oh, Mrs. Latrobe! I wonder how you can say such things!" said Hortensia with not very flattering surprise. "I think she has been sublime!"

"Very likely you do," answered Augusta coolly. "That does not prove her wise

because you are foolish. You are just a couple of sentimental school-girls together; and one makes the other more ridiculous than she need be. Self-sacrifice is all very well up to a certain point, but beyond that it is wrong. And Stella's was beyond that point."

"For her father!" repeated Hortensia.

"For a selfish old fop!" said Augusta. "Father or not, he is nothing but that—a very selfish, vain old man!"

"Oh!" said Hortensia again.

Since that Ode written in her honour she too had accepted the family myth and joined in the family worship. "How can you speak of such a man as Mr. Branscombe in this way? He is a genius—a real divinely-inspired genius."

"He has had wit enough to persuade you and others that he is," said Augusta; "which is the cleverest thing about him that I know. As for real talent he has no more than that dragonfly—and not so much—for the dragonfly knows what he can do and what he cannot, and what he does he does well; which you cannot say of Mr. Branscombe. If you must have a hero, Hortensia, take a real one and not such a sham as this!"

But Hortensia's pretty Puritanical little face gave no sign of yielding to what, after all, was less argument than assertion. On the contrary, a faint, self-satisfied smile stole over it, as she said to herself: "Augusta is jealous of me and Mr. Branscombe. I remember, now, how vexed she was when he wrote that lovely Ode to me, and she does not like him because he does not like her. He called her the other day a chrysalis not yet expanded; but he said that I was a Psyche and had gained my wings. I know him better than she does; and I know how beautiful his nature is and what a splendid intellect he has; and nothing that she can say will change my opinion." Aloud she said firmly: "Stella has done quite right to give up her marriage that she might stay with her father. Such a father is not an every-day possession."

And with this she sighed and wished that her father had been as refined and lovely as Mr. Branscombe. But for her sins he was only an unæsthetic kind of Philistine, who laughed at the vagaries of his little maid, as he called her; gave her free leave to talk according to her mood, but took care that she did nothing compromising or overt; chaffed her when she was at her sublimest, and sometimes, but rarely, reasoned with her gravely when she had gone farther than usual over the borders of good

sense and right reason — a good-tempered, domestic, utterly unromantic being, who liked his cigars and took kindly to his claret and who thought the world would be the best place imaginable but for those uncomfortable enthusiasts who are bent on making it better.

"If only people would let things alone!" he used to say, holding his glass between him and the light; "if only his little maid would be content with her lot as Providence had marked it out for her, and not bother herself about things which were no concerns of hers and for which nature had not fitted her! She had everything in life to make her happy, and what the dickens was it to her what others had or had not, were or were not! We were sent here to do our duty like rational beings-not to go tramping over the world tilting at windmills like so many Don Quixotes; and we were meant to enjoy ourselves—not to live always in the blues and as if we were going to our execution! So he would his little maid should go and sing 'I'm afloat!' and leave all these doleful dumps for the maniacs who liked them!"

By which it may be seen what an unæsthetic and semi-reprobate Mr. Lyon was; and why Hortensia sighed when she contrasted Stella's elegant father with her own.

CHAPTER XI.

HIS FAITHFUL CHUM.

It was a fine rich luscious day when every thing tempted even the most indolent or the most industrious to leave the four narrow walls of home for the fresh air and freedom of nature. But at four o'clock Mr. Branscombe was still in his studio, as he had been all the morning. And Stella was with him, as she also had been all the morning-indeed as she always was in these sad later days! She had glided into her mother's place about her father as naturally as she had inherited her jewels, or taken over the housekeeping, and was now as firmly established in it as if there had never been what Mr. Branscombe used to call a solution of continuity at all. She was his audience and his torchbearer. his secretary and amanuensis, just as that good Matilda had been; and she did almost as well. She copied out his poetry and made his manuscript music intelligible; she learnt his songs and played his symphonies; she accepted his own interpretation of his mixed metaphors and confused phrases, and believed him when he said that this thought was grand and that idea fine; she believed in him, ministered to him, thought that she understood him and was very sure that she loved him. And because she believed in him and loved him she flattered him to the top of his bent, under the idea that she was simply paying him proper respect and offering him the homage so entirely his due.

And she used to tell herself twenty times a day that her life was blessed and her labours gracious privileges, and that to be of use to her beloved and gifted father was the noblest destiny she could fulfil. Nevertheless, her young heart was often weary; do what she would the tears would rise from her choking throat to her eyes; she was getting very pale and thin and careworn altogether; and something of her mother's look of patient and concealed pain was creeping into her face, like grey shadows among the roses.

Mr. Branscombe's artistic activity had not been interrupted by his wife's death. When the details of the funeral had been arranged, a becoming studio dress of dark grey velvet, with a crape band round the arm, devised, and the Monument thought out, as he said, then he went back to his art, which was like nothing so much as the unconscious cerebration of somnambulism. To be sure his Epic was laid It would be a mutilated monument to aside. her memory, he said; all the more impressive in its unfinished state than if he had perfected it to the end. In the incompleteness of this grand work would be seen the depth and tragic intensity of his love and its great loss; and he would found his claim to immortality more on this colossal fragment than on any of his finished pieces. The grandest works of art are Greek torsos and Michael Angelo's unfinished statues, he said. His Epic should rank with them; and he was not ashamed of the parallel.

For the rest he spent his time in writing "Odes to Memory," "Threnodies," "Sonnets to My Lost Love," "To Matilda in Heaven," and the like; and in composing funeral marches and dirges, which Stella had to learn by heart and play in the twilight. Also he began a picture like to nothing in heaven or earth; but it stood in his imagination as a striking likeness of his good Matilda going up to heaven in a cloud of glory, attended by angels and cherubs'

heads. It was a cross between an Assumption and St. Catherine; but he honestly believed it to be original and all his own; and he was perhaps more content with this last effort of his genius than with anything that he had ever done.

If only he had been content to maunder about these queer artistic fields by himself—if only he would have planted and reared and harvested without claiming the companionship and assistance of another, he might have amused himself then as he would, and have been no burden to man or woman. would not labour alone—for he called it labour, and believed it to be as he called it. He was like one of those children who cannot play by themselves, but must have some one to sit by and watch them-to be their chorus, or at least their audience. So with Mr. Branscombe:—he must have an artistic henchman; and Stella was consecrated by nature and convenience to that post. As we have seen, she thought that she prized her privileges and was glad of her power to make poor papa's days less sad. But how unhappy her own were! She suffered from such a strange sense of oppression, of tedium, of fatigue, of monotony, of mental starvation too, for which she could in no wise account. She

supposed it was all because dear, dear mamma had died and poor darling Cyril had gone away so miserable and unsatisfied. It could be nothing more; but how beautiful it was out of doors to-day! How much she would like to be in the garden! Papa's studio was always rather close and stifling—the window being generally shut even on a summer's day like this, and the smell of the paint strong. If he would but come out for a little while with her?—It would do him good; and the day was so lovely.

Yet how could she ask him when he had told her that the Ode which she was transcribing must be done by five o'clock, and it was now four and she had not nearly finished? She had been writing ever since ten o'clock this morning, and she had been unpardonably slow. No; she must not look at the sunshine on the grass, at the flowers in the beds, at the blue sky above. She must not imagine the fresh scents nor the singing of the birds; she must finish this bit of work for dear papa, and please him by doing it well. And yet how unsteady her hand was to-day !-- and those wretched tears!—They blurred her vision so that she could not see what she was doing; and if they fell on the paper they spoilt everything. But she could not keep them out of her eyes; and when papa called her in his self-absorbed, preoccupied way; "My good Matilda," as he so often did, she felt as if she should die. But she must get on with this Ode, one of the many already composed in honour of her sweet mother's memory, and stifle her yearnings, her sorrow and her weariness as she best could.

Not many people came now to Rose Hill. All the visits of condolence had been paid and things had gone back into their usual groove. Stella and Mr. Branscombe were so constantly denied that the neighbours gave up making useless calls which only annoyed them, knowing as they did that this perpetual invisibility, this constant "not at home," was a fiction, not a fact. And though all knew that the order was general not individual, each took it as a personal affront and resented it accordingly.

One visitor however, was never shut out; and to whomsoever else father and daughter were denied, for Hortensia Lyon they had always a welcome. She was Mr. Branscombe's prime favourite, and he never thought the time lost that was given to her. When therefore, the servant came in to-day, and said that Miss Lyon was in the drawing-room, Mr. Branscombe, so far from objecting to this interruption, looked back from his easel with a smile, telling

Stella that she might leave her transcription till to-morrow, and that she was to keep her little friend for a few minutes till he should have finished this piece of angelic drapery, when he himself would come to them.

"Hortensia Lyon is not like other girls, vain, shallow, frivolous, ignorant," he said. "She has a heart and a mind, and goes far deeper in thought than many a woman of twice her age. I consider her a rare and precious possession here in our little sanctuary of poetry and art."

"She is a dear girl; and she values you too, papa. She will be so glad to see you. I know she thinks it an honour—as she ought."

Stella spoke warmly and quickly, with a sudden feeling of relief and pleasure, only to be accounted for on the ground of her immense love for Hortensia Lyon. It was as if the gloom which pervaded this hot stifling room like a bodily presence had been suddenly removed; and she felt almost like the Stella of former days as she shut the study-door behind her, and breathed the fresher air of the hall and passages.

When she went into the drawing-room she found not only Hortensia, but Hortensia's cousin as well—that tall, broad, big-limbed Randolph Mackenzie whom the little player at

Providence and Puritanism wanted to transform into a meek country curate devoted to lawn-tennis and Mothers' meetings, and whom nature had designed for a pioneer of civilization and the ruler of rough men whose strength he would direct and make subservient to good ends. But natural designation had not much influence over Hortensia, and playing at Providence had.

There had always been a very friendly feeling between Stella and Randolph. As the chum of her beloved—as the beloved of his chum—they met on the common ground of interest and sympathy; and each loved the other because both loved Cyril Ponsonby. At this moment then, when all her love had turned to sorrow, this visit was doubly delightful to the poor girl; and only to Cyril himself would she have shown more joy and welcome than she did to Randolph.

"When did you come?" she asked with a fluttered look.

It was almost as if Cyril himself was standing like a spirit behind that huge broad back.

"Last night. So you see I have not been long before coming to see you," he answered.

"No, indeed, you have not. And it was very kind of you," she said.

With a strange impulse she bent forward and offered him her hand again, her beautiful blue eyes filling with tears as she looked into his face with such a sudden effluence of love on her own, it made him almost start.

"I assure you, Stella, I have had no peace till I brought him here," said Hortensia, with her delicate, half-checked smile—smiling being a frivolity rather below her present standard of moral excellence and not to be indulged in needlessly. "I tell him he is sadly undisciplined, and needs far more self-control than he has," she added, looking at her massive cousin with the slender woman's amiable sense of spiritual superiority over a muscular mountain of human flesh.

She meant to imply that he was lost as he was, but worth the trouble of saving; only, he must let himself be saved by obedience to her.

"I do not pretend to be as good as you, Hortensia," he answered with frank good-nature.

This pretty little girl's quaint scoldings were as pleasant to him as if they had been caresses, and hurt him no more than a little child hurts a Newfoundland dog.

"You ought to try, Randolph!" said Hortensia, lofty and uncompromising. "You should not suffer yourself to be so impetuous as you

are—so impatient and undisciplined. We do so much more by meekness and self-control."

"Yes, I know all that," he answered. "But what is a poor rough fellow to do, Hortensia, when he is born so? I cannot make myself as sweet and gentle as you and Miss Branscombe. And I should not be what I am if I were what you are," he added with undeniable logic.

"Not rough, but undisciplined," she repeated.

"And want of discipline is to the character what roughness is to the actions. It is all the difference between one man and another."

"A very deep and lovely thought," said Mr. Branscombe, coming into the room. "Just such a thought as I should have expected to hear from the pearl of Highwood—the modern Evangeline!"

"How kind you are, dear Mr. Branscombe!" said Hortensia Lyon, looking as fluttered as Stella had looked. But the one had been the agitation of love, the other the gratification of pleased vanity.

"And what may you have been doing with yourself, Mr. Mackenzie?" asked Mr. Branscombe of Cyril's chosen friend.

He spoke with an indescribable air of halfoffensive patronage. To him Cyril and Randolph and the whole tribe of practical, athletic and unæsthetic young men were little better than machines with independent volitions brutes with the use of speech and a glimmering of reason. For all the finer purposes of human life—for all that was, as he used to say, gracious, supreme, lovely, and of precious delightfulness to man,—these muscular leaders of uncultured men, these huge-limbed pioneers of civilization were nowhere; and he valued them no more than if they had been so many elephants in broadcloth, or rhinoceroses speaking English. They were the blind Cyclopes where he was the elegant and astute Ulysses; they were the lumbering Titans, and he was the winged Mercury, the divine Apollo, the commanding Jupiter, supreme above them all.

"Not very much, sir," answered Randolph. "I have taken my B.A. degree, and I am waiting to see what will turn up. If Cyril Ponsonby goes to India I should like to go there too. You know he is like my brother, and I feel rather blank without him."

"Orestes and Pylades? Jonathan and David, hey?" returned Mr. Branscombe with a polite sneer. "You have warranty, you see, for your extreme friendship together."

"Yes," said Randolph simply. "But neither Pylades nor David was half as good a fellow as

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"Oh, papa!" said Stella. "Poor Cyril! he is not to be compared either to an owl or a carthorse!"

If Randolph had been hard put to it to keep his loyalty to his two dear friends intact under the trial ordained by Mr. Branscombe, so was poor Stella. She loved Cyril and she loved her father; she honoured both impartially, and she believed as much in the one as in the other. It was a dreadful thing to her to hear her father, who was as her king and conscience, speak slightingly of her lover, who was her ideal of young manhood. She could not be angry with papa whatever he might do. That would be impiety; and Stella was not impious. But neither could she hear poor darling Cyril spoken of with disdain, nor compared to an ugly barn-owl and a coarse cart-horse without making her protest in defence.

"My dear, you speak with the fond imagination of a romantic and love-sick girl," said Mr. Branscombe calmly. "I, who have my reason undisturbed, and who know men and manners, am better able than you to catalogue that young man. I grant him all the virtues of the natural man—all the uncouth virtues as I may say; but of the finer perceptions which come from culture, he has not a trace; and in assert-

ing that he has you but betray your own lack. Let us pass to another subject. This does not interest nor amuse me."

"How is your great picture getting on, Mr. Branscombe?" asked Hortensia with kindly haste.

She was as distressed as Randolph by this sudden onslaught which both knew cut poor Stella to the heart.

"Come and see," he answered, rising and offering her his arm. "When you have given me the benefit of your fresh young criticism I shall be more satisfied with my work. We shall return immediately, my Stella. Do not give yourself the trouble of following us. I do not think Mr. Randolph Mackenzie will care for what he may find in my poor studio," he added with a disagreeable smile.

"Yes, indeed, sir, I do," said Randolph, heroically fibbing.

But though he rose from his seat, prepared to go with his cousin and her flatterer, Stella did not move. Something stronger than even her desire to please her father held her back. She must have a word alone with Randolph. She must speak of Cyril without restraint or unfriendly witnesses.

"When, where, did you see him last?" she

asked hurriedly, so soon as the door was shut. "How was he? How did he look? What did he say? Poor Cyril! Poor darling Cyril! Oh Randolph! I sometimes feel as if I should like to die—as if I could not live and know my poor darling Cyril to be so unhappy—and through me—for all that it was my duty!"

"Don't cry, Miss Stella, please don't," said Cyril's chum affectionately and with genuine distress, not knowing what to do for the best and as much afraid of his own sympathetic impulses as he was sorry for her grief. "He was very down, poor old man, and feels his disappointment terribly," he went on to say frankly, not being good at quick subterfuge. "He sent all sorts of messages to you; said I was to give you his love and that you were never to doubt him, never to forget him, nor think that he would forget you; that you were to believe in him whatever you might hear, for that he would be true and faithful to the last and would wait for your promise to the end of his life. Only you were not to give him up. You were to be firm to him as he would be to you, and hold yourself always engaged though you were separated."

"So I will," said Stella. "Nothing should

make me give him up. The engagement is not broken, only postponed; and unless he wants to break it off I will not."

"No; I am sure you will not," said Randolph, warmly. "But tell me, Miss Stella, why has Mr. Branscombe taken such a dislike to him? Did Cyril offend him in any way? I know he would not have done so intentionally, and if he did, it was quite by accident and mistake. I was never more taken aback in my life when he let fly like that!"

"Nor was I," said Stella, turning pale. "I cannot understand him! Papa is so wise and good and just and noble, I cannot make it out. Cyril perhaps vexed him because he would not at the very first consent to postpone our marriage; but papa said nothing so bitter then as he did to-day—at least not to me. Cyril told me that he had been rather hard on him when they were alone."

"Yes, he told me too, that Mr. Branscombe had been uncommonly rough on him," said Randolph in his more familiar vernacular. "But you do not mind, do you, Miss Stella? and you will not be influenced?"

"No," said Stella firmly; "not even papa could turn me against Cyril."

"That is right! That is just what I ex-

pected!" said Cyril's chum with almost passionate warmth. "I think my cousin one of the dearest and best girls in the world, but I think you are even better. I never pitied Cyril so much as now, when I see more clearly than I ever did what he has lost. If I had a saint I would make you that saint, Miss Stella. They gave you the right name—Stella, the 'Star!'"

He said all this with a rush of excitement and passionate enthusiasm which would have drawn on him the rebuke of his self-controlled little cousin, had she heard it. But something seemed to carry him away in spite of himself. He had always admired Stella Branscombe, had always loved her as his sister for Cyril's sake; but he had never known half her goodness, half her beauty, until to-day. And he had never, as he said, pitied Cyril so much as now, nor felt that strange flood of something which was like envy without its bitterness and with only its yearning desire for a like portion to be meted out to himself.

"We will always be kind to him, you and I?" he said, still as strongly moved as before. "If the whole world deserts him we will be faithful, you and I?" he repeated.

"Yes," she said, giving him her hand.

He raised it to his lips, moved to strange reverence and poetry of mood.
"Beautiful Stella!" he said in an under voice.

"Cyril's Star—and mine!"

CHAPTER XII.

THOSE MISS PENNEFATHERS.

In almost every country society is a family the girls of which go by the name of "those"—"those Miss Browns," or "that Miss Smith"—girls who are credited with all the faults and follies accidental to a misguided youth and more than ordinarily peccant humanity—girls who may be thankful if they escape without graver scandals sticking like unclean burrs to their names, and who may think themselves fortunate if they find one person in the place who will stand by them heartily and courageously.

Now the two Misses Pennefather were the "those" of Highwood; and it must be confessed that they did something to earn their title. Georgie and Pattie Pennefather, or, as the irreverent were wont to call them, Gip and

Pip, were the standing target for all the poisoned arrows of ill-nature stored up in the society hereabouts. And a society whereof old Mrs. Morshead was an eminent and influential member, was pretty certain to have a respectable store of these same poisoned arrows, and to be just as certain to use them freely.

Mrs. Morshead, never weary of "flinging her five fingers in the face" of the human family in general, flung them with special disdain and abhorrence in the faces of "those Miss Pennefathers." They represented to her the whole circle of nineteenth-century iniquity, from tight dresses and high heels to Professional Beauties and the thronged lobbies of the Divorce Court; and it was only paying proper homage to good manners to deny that they had any at all. "Those Miss Pennefathers" carried on their nicely-shaped little backs wallets filled with every fault and impropriety short of glaring vice, that English girls of good family could have, while denied the possession of any pretty little fringe or plume of virtue to soften the ugliness of these sinful packets. They were fast, bold, loud, vulgar, idle and objectionable young hussies all round; and as for their good looks, of which they were so absurdly vain and which silly people made so much fuss about,

Mrs. Morshead protested she did not see them; and thought the whole family downright plain, and those two horrid girls the plainest of the lot. They were at the bottom of all the mischief of the place; and if the place did its duty by itself, they would be cut, as they deserved. Their dress was positively improper; and their manners were like those of two barmaids or cigar-girls, rather than of young ladies whose mother was an Honourable. When some one bolder or more generous than the rest, objected to her sweeping condemnations, and pointed out a few forgotten graces—as, that they were very good-natured and never said unkind things of their neighbours; or, very charitable, and did a great many kind deeds to the poor; that they were really not so wild and extravagant as they seemed to be, but had the art of making a little go a great way, and a big show out of small material—she used to quite lose herself in her wrath, and declare that at her age she ought to know one thing from another, and be allowed to express her opinion without fear of contradiction from her juniors. She knew what she was talking about when she said those Miss Pennefathers were a disgrace to the place; and that if it were not for the father and motherwho however did not deserve so much con-

sideration—she for one would never suffer them inside her house again. But then she had always been too considerate for others, she would go on to say in perfect sincerity and faithfully believing in her own words; and much thanks she had got for it from any one! Certainly she had got none from those Pennefather people, who had not once sent to ask after her when she had lost her favourite Skye, her beloved and precious little Joe. Those Miss Pennefathers, in a word—those laughing, gay, and careless twins—were about the bitterest of the many bitter drops in the cross old woman's jaundiced cup of life, and stood at the highest point in her cruel scale of condemnation.

She did not really love any human being—her daughter and her bonny little grandson not excepted—but even she drew distinctions and disliked some more than others. Between Hortensia Lyon and those Miss Pennefathers; while she ridiculed the former for her puritanical affections, she vilified the latter for their want of all the decencies of life and habits; or between Stella Branscombe and these two hussies, this Gip and Pip whom all the young men called by their names like their sisters, though no one, she used to add with a sneer, ever thought of marrying them—though Stella

was really sickening, with her dear papa here and her dear papa there, dear papa's poems and dear papa's paintings, the beautiful oratorio that dear papa has just composed, and the dear little song that dear papa wrote out last night, still, said Mrs. Morshead, her excess of admiration, silly and exaggerated as it was, was not so bad as their want of respect. Mater and the Governor—Mater so awfully jolly in a house and the Governor the dearest old boy in the world—where did they expect to go to when they could say such things as these! It would be impiety to doubt what would be their end.

"Ah!" said Mrs. Morshead, shaking her high-capped old head viciously; "let me have the management of those Miss Pennefathers for six months! I would Mater them, I can tell you! If I had not taught them propriety by then, I would—I don't know what I would not do!—eat my own fingers—I declare I would! And this is the kind of thing that you approve of, Augusta," she added angrily. "And if I did not keep you in hand, and make you respectful in spite of yourself, you would Mater me, I suppose? Not while I am alive! Not if I had to die for it!"

"You and I are different from the Pennefather girls and their mother," said Augusta quietly. "I do not approve of their manners, as you know; but," she added a little imprudently, "I cannot help seeing that they are very good-hearted, good-tempered things, and always ready to do any one a kindness."

"Charity begins at home," snapped Mrs. Morshead. "I have no opinion of your very kind people who make all the world their bosom friends, and run about with baskets and all that, when they ought to be sitting quietly at home, darning their stockings and looking after the maids. It is only another form of idleness and want of domestic duty; and I would not give sixpence for the kindness and good-heartedness of these two young minxes—these precious friends of yours! Give me something more sterling; something that makes home home! Ah! my pretty boy!" she suddenly added in a caressing tone, as a huge Persian cat slowly raised himself from a purple velvet cushion where he had been sleeping by the side of her chair, and lightly leapt into her lap. "My precious Shah! my beauty! my dear old boy!" she continued, stroking him fondly. "You at least love your mistress and do not tell lies, or do wickedness. If all the world was like you, my pretty! But he must not eat the birds the pretty little birds! No! no! he must not

do that, old dear! And Augusta!" to her daughter, sharply; "if that Tony of yours drags this cat about as he does, I will slap his hands the next time I see him. So mind, I give you warning. I shall have the creature strangled some day, if I don't take care! Do you hear me, Augusta?"

"Yes, mamma, I will tell Tony to be more careful," her daughter answered in her calm, smooth way; while the old woman grumbled out: "Yes, you had better!" and then fell to kissing and caressing her cat once more.

We all have our soft points, and this was Mrs. Morshead's:—She loved animals—this love culminating in a species of idolatry for her Persian cat. Animals were to her what friends and lovers are to others; and to them she gave all the love and respect which she denied to her own kind. Men and women were vile: children were simply imps in embryo; society was a mass of iniquity from end to end; human motives were all corrupt; but cats and dogs and cows and horses were heirs of all the virtues and those who ill-treated dumb creatures were infinitely more criminal than those who oppressed and half-murdered their own brethren. But her love for animals was eminently false and unwholesome. It was not the overflow of that large and comprehensive sympathy which, having first done its normal work, finds new channels of benevolence. It was simply a substitute for human kindness and took to itself what was due to man. Thus, she gave nothing to schools, hospitals, or asylums, but she subscribed largely to the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, to the Home for Lost Dogs, and she was one of the most generous benefactors, as well as one of the most active propagandists, for the Anti-vivisection Society, which, perhaps, she held as the most important of all. Against the physiologists indeed, she was specially irate, and would rather, she said, have the whole human race decimated by disease than insure the health and well-being of the world by the sacrifice of a rabbit or a guinea-pig. Men had not made such a good thing of life, according to her, that they should be perpetuated by vicarious suffering. Let them perish from off the face of the earth, but let the dear dumb brutes remain untroubled and undisturbed. the same she eat her beef and mutton, her lamb and veal and chicken with a clear conscience; and when Sandro Kemp once urged this flesheating against her theories, as a proof of the universal law of transmutation for the one part, and of the need of human supremacy for the other, she told him he was impious and desired him to change the conversation.

If only she had given her own kind a little of the compassion that she lavished on those dear dumb brutes! But she tyrannized over her daughter; treated her little grandson with fatal harshness; made her service one of pain and fear to her domestics; and took away the fine flavour of repute from two young girls whose only sin was in their heedlessness, their beauty and their youth. This was not cruelty according to her; but to hurt any creature with four legs was a crime which a Christian legislature should make punishable as felony.

If Mrs. Morshead disliked "those Miss Pennefathers," the twins shrank with as much antipathy from her. For all their careless and unthinking natures, for all their buoyancy and elasticity of spirit, there was something in the old woman's persistent sourness and opposition which oppressed them as nothing else did. They liked Augusta—indeed no one could fail to like her, even-tempered and reasonable as she was; and they pitied her and little Tony more than they pitied the poorest person in the parish; but old Mrs. Morshead was a horror, and more than they could stand, save under the strongest compulsion of social necessity. When they paid

her the visits demanded by duty and politeness, they paid them as seldom and made them as short as they could, while doing their best to avoid pitfalls and stumbling blocks of offence. This was the hardest part of the business. Walking blindfold among burning ploughshares was nothing to it, and skating on thin ice was comparatively safe going. With Mrs. Morshead the burning ploughshares were as thick as pebbles on the seashore and the ice was never more than a mere film which gave way as soon as touched. Hence their visits were both brief and rare: and as Mrs. Morshead in common with all tyrants, liked to be able to bully ad libitum, but to be made as much of as if she were the sweetest creature alive, she resented as a personal insult the slackness of intercourse which was the order between The Laurels and Sherrardine, where the Pennefathers lived.

In truth, she resented everything whatever about the Pennefathers, whether affecting herself or no. All the circumstances of the family made one huge conglomerate of annoyances, one great bête noire against which she waged incessant and ineffectual war. The very name was an offence. Pennefather! What a mouthful it was, and how absurd altogether! Pennefather here and Moneypenny there—one would

think that Highwood had been originally peopled by coiners, she said, putting her old prunella-slippered feet on all the rules of philology. And the affectation of their calling their place Sherrardine, because Mrs. Pennefather's father had lived at Sherrards, the family place, for the few years of his Viscountship!-As if any one cared to know that they had a Viscount in the family—tacking themselves on like that to the aristocracy simply because that silly woman was an Honourable! They were substantially only simple commoners like any one else, and not so good as some others. For, if report said true, they had enough to do to make both ends meet in their noisy, riotous, untidy household. And if those Miss Pennefathers kept at home a little more than they did, and thought more of their duties and less of their dress, it would be far better for them and every one connected with them. And if they paid their bills more punctually and gave fewer dances and garden-parties, and all that nonsense, it would be more to their credit. And so she, Mrs. Morshead, would tell them some day. If Mr. and Mrs. Pennefather did not know how to guide their own children aright, it was the duty of a Christian matron of her age and experience—the oldest inhabitant of the parish

and perhaps if all people had their due the most respectable—it was her duty to give them a little friendly advice and tell them what the world said of them.

She was full of this resolution when the doorbell rang and the servant ushered in the Misses Pennefathers, as he might have ushered in two young lion-cubs fresh from the jungle.

Crisp, curly, jet-black hair, surmounted by audacious white-beaver hats turned up short on one side and flapping low down on the other; four roving, bright and dark-brown eyes set under brows as straight as if they had been ruled by a line and as black as if they had been drawn in ink; two pretty little Roxalana noses; wide, smiling, almost scarlet lips, showing a full set of small square teeth when they laughed—and they were always laughing; cheeks dotted with dimples and as bright as damask roses in the sun; stature just five feet three, exact measurement, not a millimètre more or less in either; trim, well-busked figures, draped in showy garments tied tightly back to the full display of all the gracious curves and generous outlines, the modelling and shaping of art and nature combined: loud voices as clear as silver bells: frank manners knowing no fear and seeking no favour; an atmosphere of unchecked gaiety, of abounding vitality, of girlish devil-may-carishness, of the very insolence of youthful happiness; this was the best description that could be given of the two Misses Pennefathers, that Gip and Pip whom all men loved and no one wished to marry, and who were to Mrs. Morshead the very head and ears of her biggest bête noire.

Poor, laughing, heedless Gip and Pip! The day had come when their trimestral visit to that sour old Mrs. Morshead had to be paid; and they paid it for duty's sake and Augusta's. But it was a corvée, a fighting with wild beasts by no means agreeable to contemplate, and one where they knew they should come off the worst.

In they came with that general look of flush and hurry and taking life and circumstances by storm which was characteristic of them. Exactly alike in dress and person they were to Mrs. Morshead a reduplication of offence. She never knew which from which; nor did any one, indeed; so that it was impossible to take refuge from one with the other, or to change the venue and mitigate the nuisance. There they both were, one just like the other; their bright eyes roving round the room in the purposeless way of bright eyes conscious of

their beauty, their voices clanging with loud but not unmelodious force, and their whole manner and appearance curiously suggestive of audacity, defiance and good-temper.

"How do you do, Mrs. Morshead?" both said in a breath. "What a lovely day, isn't it? How do you do, Augusta dear? Isn't it

splendid weather?"

"I never remember such splendid weather, do you?" Gip went on to say, in her loud, clear voice that reminded you of a cascade, it was so hurried, impetuous, and continuous. "And they say it's going to last for ever so long; that's awfully jolly news, isn't it? And so we are going to give a picnic on the strength of it; and you will come to it, of course, Augusta? All our friends are coming, and some from London, too. The Cowley boys will be here, and our own boys are at home now-Jemmy came last night "-Jemmy was a young sub-lieutenant in the navy, waiting for his ship--"and Colonel Moneypenny, nice old boy, says that he will come too and bring the champagne; and Sandro Kemp is to put us all into a picture—and Sandro is a great admirer of yours, Augusta, and is always talking about you; so is Colonel Moneypenny, too—so you will have two strings to your bow if you come; and,

as times go, that is a very fair allowance for one woman and more than any one else will have!"

Here Gip laughed like a musical peal of thunder, and Pip laughed too, for company. Mrs. Morshead shot out her under-lip and put up her hands to her head.

"Good gracious!" she said crossly.

"What is the matter with you, Mrs. Morshead?" asked Pip sympathetically. "Have you a headache? I'm awfully sorry, I'm sure! Headaches must be such awfully disgusting things. I never had one in my life, except when I fell from the apple-tree and pitched right on the back of my poor little nut. And then it ached like fury. I thought it was all over with me, and I was never so frightened in my life. It was sickening. But it taught me to be careful how I trusted to those horrid old rotten branches again. The apples were prime, for all that, and worth a spill that didn't quite do for one."

"Perhaps, Miss Pennefather, you will be good enough to translate what you have said into English," said Mrs. Morshead, when Pattie stopped to take breath. "I am not of the new school, I am thankful to say, and I do not understand slang."

"Oh, I am sure, I am awfully sorry if I slung you any slang," said Pip penitentially. "You see we are so used to it from the boys when they come home that it slips out when one doesn't mean it. But, indeed, every one talks slang nowadays; you can't get on without. A girl looks such a stick when she does not talk like the rest; and I hate sticky girls. Neither George nor I are sticks; and we don't patronize the breed at home."

And at this she laughed in her turn, and Gip joined in without knowing why; and again Mrs. Morshead put up her hands to her ears and shot out her under-lip.

"Upon my word, Miss Pennefather, you and your sister are the two very noisiest young ladies of my acquaintance," she said angrily.

Pip laughed and Gip laughed.

"Well, I grant you, Mrs. Morshead, we are not of the mealy-mouthed mum kind," said the former, whose turn it was this time to undertake the terrible old woman. It had been her sister's in their last visit.

"You might be more like ladies and yet not mum or mealy-mouthed, as you elegantly express it," said Mrs. Morshead. "You are like two—I don't know what, in a room."

"Oh, we are nothing!" cried Pip audaciously.

"You should hear the boys, how they sing out all over the place! They make such a row that sometimes you can hardly hear yourself speak. Even Mater, who is the dearest old lady in the world, can't always stand it, and is obliged to tell them to shut up. And when Jemmy comes home, it is just awful, the stramash that goes on from morning to night! But Jem is awfully good fun and spins the jolliest yarns! He is a dear old man, and looks awfully handsome in his uniform, with all its gagits!"

"No; I cannot and will not bear it!" cried Mrs. Morshead, roused to that point of disgust which lies beyond endurance. "Miss Pennefather, your language is simply disgraceful; and if your own parents allow you to use words which are never heard in any lady's drawing-room, I do not. In my house, you will please to remember, that you are talking to a lady and you will behave like ladies—if you can."

"I am awfully sorry—" began Pip.

"No, you are not awfully sorry—not awfully anything," interrupted Mrs. Morshead. "I am very glad if you feel ashamed of yourself, because then perhaps you may improve; but there is no improvement possible while you use that most objectionable and foolish expression."

Pip looked at her sister and made a slight

grimace; her sister looked at her and repeated the sign.

"I think it's time to go, Patrick," said Gip as a diversion. "We have no end of things to do, you know. So you'll be sure to come next Wednesday?" she added, turning to Augusta. "At Crossings Bridge, remember; two o'clock sharp; and if possible to bring a basket of gooseberries, do. You have awfully fine ones I know; and fruit is always good gear in a picnic."

"What are you saying? What are you asking?" said Mrs. Morshead savagely.

"We are giving a picnic, and we want Augusta," said Gip boldly.

"My daughter cannot go," said Mrs. Morshead; and as she spoke she planted her heavy old feet firmly on the footstool.

"Oh, Mrs. Morshead!" cried both the sisters together. "It will not be half the fun without Augusta."

"Mrs. Latrobe has her duties at home," said the terrible old woman, fixing her eyes with a stony stare on her daughter.

The delicate pink flush came up on the comely cheeks, but Augusta's voice and manner were as smooth and soft and unruffled as they always were.

"Do you want me at home, mamma?" she asked with perfect serenity.

"Do I want you at home? What an absurd question!" said Mrs. Morshead. "I do not want you at home, if you mean that, for you are not of much use to me at any time; but I should like to know what is to become of that boy of yours if you go out for the whole day like this? Do you expect me to be his nurse? And you know that I strongly object to his being in the kitchen with the servants."

"Oh, Tony comes too! He is such a jolly little chap, and we are all so fond of him," said Gip. "Certainly, you must bring the old man!" she added to Augusta. "That need not keep you; so now of course you will come?"

"If you really do not want me at home, mamma, it would be pleasant for the child and would keep him out of your way," said Augusta, to whom the prospect of a day's freedom from her mother was a boon too great to be refused if in any way possible to be accepted.

"Anything for pleasure and gadding about," said Mrs. Morshead. "At your age, Augusta—a widow as you are, with a dear little boy to educate and look after—I wonder at you for your greediness after amusement! It is not decent. When a woman has been married and

left a widow as you have been—and under all the peculiar circumstances of your case"—she added with cruel significance, "I think she ought to content herself with home and home duties, and leave all this idleness to young ladies like the Miss Pennefathers for instance—young ladies who have nothing to think of, and no heads for anything but pleasure if they had."

"Oh, Mrs. Morshead, a little fun is good for every one," said Pattie. "And Augusta is so nice in a thing of this kind."

"Of course I would not go if you did not wish it, mamma," said Augusta cheerfully. "But if you do not want me for anything, indeed I should like it. You are going to Greenhill Falls, you say?" turning to Gip. "It is years and years since I was there. I should like it so much if I can be spared."

"As for sparing you, I can spare you well enough," answered Mrs. Morshead; "for you do not make yourself so very useful, Augusta, that you cannot be spared, if that is what you mean. What I object to is the principle. A woman of your age, and after what should have been such a sobering experience, flying over the country with a parcel of giddy gigglers just as if you were a girl yourself—it is not becoming and not decent, as I said."

"Just this once, Mrs. Morshead!" pleaded Gip.

"She will help to keep all of us young ones in order," added Pip.

"It would be very nice to see the dear old Falls again," said Augusta. "I remember so well the first time I went with you, mamma. I was just my little Tony's age, and I remember how you took me in your arms and carried me over the wet places in the field."

"Ah!" sighed Mrs. Morshead, shaking her head; "there are not many such mothers as I was to you, Augusta. And finely you have repaid me! But I have never been hard to you, bad a daughter as you have been to me. If you want to go and take the child with you I am sure I do not wish to stand in your way. I do not like all this gadding about, as you know, but I do not care for mere lip-service, mere grudging obedience. Go if you like. I do not mind being left alone all the day with no one to speak to. I am used to my loneliness. Oh, yes, certainly; go and enjoy yourself. Do not mind me. I am an old woman of no good to any one—only fit to be dead and buried."

"Not quite that, mamma," said Augusta; "but if you really do not care"—turning to Gip she added; "I will be at Crossing's Bridge

next Wednesday, at ten o'clock punctually; and I dare say mamma will let me bring a basket of gooseberries with us."

"Shall I order Page to give you all the peaches and grapes in the hothouse?" asked Mrs. Morshead sarcastically.

"Oh, thanks, Mrs. Morshead!" answered Pip with exasperating gratitude. "That would be good gear! How awfully jolly! You are really quite too awfully good!"

"Well, as I am not quite a fool I do not think I will empty my hothouse for your picnic," said Mrs. Morshead, still satirically.

On which the two girls laughed, as at a good joke, and then took their leave, Gip saying in a whisper to Augusta:

"And mind you make yourself awfully killing, for I want you to look your very best. We are not going to have a single stick among us, and we are going in for a pocketful of fun all round. It is jolly that you are coming," she added affectionately. "We were in an awful fright that you wouldn't be let."

"Well!" said Gip to Pip, as soon as they had got safely outside the door; "of all the awful old toads that ever lived that Mrs. Morshead is the worst! How I pity that poor, dear Augusta, and what an angel she is!"

"If I had such a scarecrow for my mother, I would give her pepper, and make it hot," answered reckless Pip. "Ugh! It gives the back shivers!" she added, shuddering. "I declare I feel as if I was all over nasty creechers-crawl-up-yer."

"She is a horror," returned Gip. "How I wish that stupid old Moneypenny would make up his mind and marry poor Augusta out of hand. It would be only charity to save her from such an old Turk as that mother of hers. Poor Augusta! What a life she must lead!"

"I wouldn't be her for five thousand a year," said Pip energetically. "I would rather sweep a crossing or break stones on the road!"

"I should prefer the crossing," said Gip with a reflective air. "It's good gear to sweep a crossing in a club-street; and one would get one's self up to look awfully killing in a Dolly Varden."

"And perhaps catch a lord," said low-minded Pip.

"That would be jolly," returned her sister. "What would you be married in, Patrick?"

"Cream-satin," said Pip with commendable promptitude. "What would you, George?"

"Cream-satin, too," was the answer.

And then they both went off into a dis-

cussion on those extremely problematical bridal dresses of theirs, and those wedding tours which at present were all about the grounds of Spanish Castles; and agreed, as they always did, down to the last square inch of "kilting," and the remotest little fact of their journey.

They had never quarrelled since they were born; and in the family they were known by the name of the Doves, when not the Inseparables or the Siamese, Castor and Pollux feminina, or the Cherrybles—which last word had the advantage of uniting two ideas in one skin, according to the phraseology of sub-lieutenant Jemmy, whose brilliant idea it was.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE FAMILY AT SHERRARDINE.

It was the loudest, noisiest, best tempered, most unscholarly and most generous family in the county. There was not a potential genius nor a present student among them, but there was not a coward nor a "crab," as they called the cross-grained when speaking among themselves—not one who would have told a lie to have saved his life, nor who would have forfeited his honour to have redeemed his fortune.

There were six of them for the first and most important batch—the twins leading off the family ball, as they used to say, followed in less than a year by Jemmy, the sublicutenant, with three other boys all treading on each other's heels as closely as might be. Then came a gap of ten years, when the circle was finally closed by the advent of a pretty little girl as the general plaything and uni-

versal delight. Thus the family proper—Nora not counting; being a kind of offset and common property—had the appearance of being all of one age. For Jack, the youngest, was as tall and almost as strong at seventeen as was Jemmy at twenty; and among the four there was not half an inch of difference in height nor two pounds to spare in weight. The whole six were fashioned after the same pattern—the boys being just as dark-haired, as bright-eyed, as loud-voiced and as socially audacious as the Doves: and, to a stranger, it was the oddest as well as the most bewildering thing in the world to see them all assembled together. It was impossible to tell which was which, until you had learned the minor signs. Even in the family itself mistakes in voices and backs were continually being made; and, as for Georgie and Pattie, no one knew one from the other without her distinctive brooch. It was one of the favourite amusements of these two curly-headed young scamps to play practical jokes on the household by reason of their strange resemblance; and good-humoured rows were always going on because Jemmy said it was Gip who had picked that ripe peach which he had been watching, and Jack swore that it was Pip, and neither of the accused would tell

which it was. When they changed or took off their signboards, as their silver name-brooches were generally called, not the mother herself knew them apart. And if she did not who else could? As for the boys, they borrowed each other's names and wore each other's clothes with perfect impartiality; and thus the Pennefather family had a queer shifting phantasmagoric kind of personality which made each member responsible for the follies committed by the whole together, to the destruction of all identity and the accumulation of individual blame.

It might have been supposed that the father and mother would have done something to keep all these turbulent elements in some kind of order; but Mr. Pennefather was still only a great boy himself, and Mrs. Pennefather was one of those good-tempered, careless kind of women who never look beyond the day, and who only desire to see people happy about them. Her motherhood was comprised in two things only—to keep her children in good health and to let them be happy in their own way. She would have been very glad if they could have sucked in learning with their oranges, but she objected to their being forced to learn against their will; and she would

rather they were well-grown, vigorous, lighthearted dunces than leaders of the world's best thoughts by the sacrifice of the sunshine and laughter of their youth. She had married when only just seventeen; so that both she and her husband were even now in the very zenith of their own lives and far more the play-fellows than the guides or rulers of their children. Add to which, the consciousness of her aristocratic lineage, which lifted them above the level of the village-herd and absolved them from the obligation of class conformity and spiritless respect for other people's prejudices, and just so much income as gave them all they wanted -with a scramble-and their wildness, their audacity, their ingrained Bohemianism can be accounted for; if to some the explanation carried with it no justification;—as especially did it not to Mrs. Morshead and that other member of her social bête noire, Mr. Branscombe.

To Mr. Branscombe indeed, this noisy, unscholarly and unæsthetic family was intensely antipathetic; and he and Mrs. Morshead drove their little chariots of condemnation side by side over the Pennefather course; though even here they did not agree, save in their joint end of vilifying these social abominations.

To express his feelings, as well as to relieve his mind, the elegant Mr. Branscombe once drew a caricature which represented all the Pennefathers as rather curious-looking savages shooting arrows at an Apollo, crowned with bay and holding his lyre in his hand. The figure which did duty for the great god of light and poetry had as much of his own likeness as he could manage to give it; and the drawing was after his special manner—proudly independent of anatomy, proportion and perspective. The arrows were going all ways but the right, and would have hit the moon sooner than the god; and the eight savages were very little above the artistic ability of the ploughboy's chalk-drawing on the barn door. But Mr. Branscombe saw in it his intention rather than the execution, and, under solemn promise of secrecy from each in turn, handed it about among the neighbours. And all save Mrs. Morshead basely laughed and hypocritically pronounced it clever and wonderfully amusing. But the terrible old woman, who also scorned a lie, when she gave it back said to Mr. Branscombe:

"Well! all I can say is, this is not my idea of drawing; and those things are no more like the Pennefathers than they are like me. They are not human beings at all; you might as well call them tadpoles at once."

"Ah, my dear lady," said Mr. Branscombe with sublime tranquillity; "it takes an education to understand true art. Only artists can appreciate artists."

To which Mrs. Morshead snapped for answer:

"I know a good thing when I see it, as well as any one else. But I don't call that good. I call it a horrid daub."

Mr. Branscombe never forgave that criticism, nor since then had he set foot in Mrs. Morshead's house; and he vowed he never would.

It mattered little to the Pennefathers whether Mr. Branscombe caricatured them or no. The whole family held him in the supremest contempt, as a poor creature not worth powder and shot and to be passed over with the contempt which great dogs feel for little ones. They laughed at his æsthetics, his foppery and his vanity; and he ridiculed the want in them of all that they despised in him, and added to it contempt for the manliness or vigour on which they most prided themselves. They thought him a jackass and he thought them earthworms; they would not have given sixpence for all his art in a lump, and he would not

have given a penny for all their stamina and tone.

So the little quarrel ran along the highway of life between Sherrardine and Rose Hill; but when poor Mrs. Branscombe died, it was Mr. Pennefather who wrote the most feeling note; it was Mrs. Pennefather who gave Stella the most sympathetic kiss on that first visit of condolence; and it was the six savages who, on the day of the funeral, felt the most dismal and sorrowful of all at Highwood, save Augusta Latrobe and Mrs. Prinsep. Blunt brains for the finer work of intelligence—these they undoubtedly had; but the creatures had good hearts; and if logarithms were as a sealed book to them, human kindness was their daily primer. Resentment and constancy of illfeeling were as little in their way as the higher branches of mathematics or the Hegelian philosophy. When the grave closed over the dead it closed also over the last shred of "misunderstanding;" and even Mr. Branscombe, who had all the tenacity of estrangement proper to a vain man, was forced to accept the olive-branch and bury the hatchet. This came all the more easy to him inasmuch as he received their frank surrender, not as sympathy with his sorrow, but as homage to his personality; and to pay

homage to Mr. Branscombe was to possess yourself of that sentiment which did service with him for friendship.

The one blot in the picnic that was to come off was the fact that Stella Branscombe would not be there.

"I suppose it is impossible," said Jemmy with a slightly sombre air.

The Doves always accused Master Jemmy of being "hard hit in that quarter."

"Oh, well!" said Gip opening her eyes; "I don't think it would quite do to go to a picnic when one's mother has not been dead six weeks. What a muff you are, Jem, to talk such rubbish!"

"I don't see what harm it would do," said Jemmy. "It must be awfully slow for the poor girl to be shut up all the day long with only old Branscombe. I dare say he reads his poetry to her and plays on the piano as he used in poor Mrs. Branscombe's time. How sick I should be! I'd rather be mast-headed than listen to one of old Branscombe's yarns!"

"So would I," said Gip.

"How could you be mast-headed, Gip, when you are only a girl?" asked Jemmy gravely; for though given to practical jokes the family, as a family, was profoundly literal.

"No, I don't suppose I could be. My petticoats would come in the way," said Gip; and then they both laughed as at a good joke, the point of which was intelligible only to themselves.

"It must be awfully jolly to be a sailor and a boy," said Gip after they had finished their laugh and come back to such common sense as they possessed.

"It's not all honey, I can tell you!" said Jemmy. "One gets pepper pretty often; and then it's stinging hot and no mistake!"

"Then you shouldn't do anything to get pepper," said Gip sagely. "You could keep out of it if you liked."

"Oh, it's all very well to say that, Gip!" said Jemmy from the height of his superior wisdom. "But no fellow can keep out of it; and I do believe those fellows give it to us to keep their hands in and just for the fun of the thing. Why the very blue-jackets say we often get jawed at when we don't deserve it; and so we do; and it's a shame. But it's jolly fun all the same," added the good-tempered young fellow laughing again; "and I dare say the youngsters are too cocky and want it taken out of them."

"I think you are improved, Jem," said Gip critically.

"Think so?" he answered. "If I'm not I ought to be, for I've been jawed at often enough!"

"I dare say it did you good," said Gip, still

critical.

"What did him good?" asked Mr. Pennefather coming into the room.

"Being jawed at," continued Gip, with no more consciousness of vulgarity than she had of crime.

"Ah! you youngsters want the dust taken out of your jackets," said the father of the flock, neglecting his duty of rebuke mainly because he did not see it.

"Well, Pater, you didn't like it when you were a youngster yourself," said Jemmy. "And I don't suppose any one ever did."

"I don't suppose they did, Jem; but it has to be done all the same," answered his father

laughing.

And then all three laughed, as Jem and Gip had laughed before; the moving cause, which would have been invisible to every one else, somehow clear as daylight to them. And at the sound of that well-known peal Pip, who was never very far from her companion Dove, came jumping through the open window, loudly demanding what the fun was all about and what was up?

And when her sister answered: "Pater says we youngsters have to be jawed at for our good," Pip joined in the fun, and they went through a second edition with as much hearty zeal as they had gone through the first.

Undoubtedly they were the most mindless and unpoetic set of intellectual savages to be found within the four seas—and Mr. Branscombe's refined contempt was so far justified. And yet, might there not be something better even than art and poetry and philosophy?—Something that atoned for those unidealizing brains, that childish laughter, those comparatively low aims of life?—Something that redeemed this endless rollick from absolute folly, because showing that it was not heartlessness if it was unquestionably mental vacuity?

To be happy in themselves, inoffensive to others, to abjure all active ill-nature and to do such good as they could in charity to the poor, made about the sum of their philosophy. No pessimist could have ever taught them the value of discontent, the good of doubt and disbelief of mankind at large, or the virtue of turning outwards all the seamy sides of every person and every thing. No political economist could have convinced them of the sin of almsgiving or the evil of going beyond the market-price in

wages or gratuities. They were utterly and entirely dense on both these points; and it was fighting with bags of wool to demonstrate to them the enormity of charity or the check given to the progress of humanity and the improvement of things by the sin of cheerfulness and contentment.

Even now, when the last explosion of laughter because Pater had said jawing was a good thing for the young, had ceased, a characteristic piece of their general iniquity was perpetrated. Old Betty Bailey came whining up to the front door with her usual story of hunger and distress; and would the kind gentleman give her sixpence? for indeed she was but badly off, and ailing. And Mr. Pennefather, instead of sending her about her business and threatening her with the constable and the lock-up and the dread Bench on the Saturday, to teach her how to beg the next time, ordered the old sinner into the kitchen, where a glass of good beer, a loaf of bread and a screw of tea were given her, though every one knew that she made up, from one thing and another, nigh on four shillings a week; and it is possible to live on sixpence a day. On the basis of that sixpence a day Betty Bailey was rich; and if she would but have abjured tea and tobacco she would soon have

been a capitalist. Instead of which, with her wealth of four shillings a week and potential saving of two in the month, she came begging and crying to Sherrardine; and Mr. Pennefather gave her doles just as if she had been poor enough to need them!

It was pauperizing the neighbourhood, of course, to go on like this; but the master of Sherrardine could not be made to see the thing in the right light or be brought to confess that he was wrong. Lectured and argued with by travelling economists he stuck to his point with the tenacity of a woman, and held on to his peg when the ground had been cut to ribbons beneath his feet. He had only one argument, and he used it with exasperating consistency, even when he had been proved guilty of an offence to the community at large.

"The poor creatures are very badly off," he used to say. "I cannot sit in my own comfortable home with a good fire and a good dinner and not feel for their wretchedness. And if I feel for them I must help them; and political economy may go to the deuce."

He was a dense, woolly-headed unscientific son of Adam, granted; but there were men in the world perhaps a little worse than he—men to whom he could have given weight, yet ridden far past on the road which we generally call the road to Heaven; and, all things considered, society would not have made a bad bargain of it had it exchanged a few wiry prim-set virtues for some of his soft and generous faults.

They were all in the same way—all generous, open-handed, good-natured people who made war only against peevishness and churlishness in all their forms, and who thought life eminently worth living for all who did their duty and let unpleasant things slide.

After old Betty Bailey had been disposed of and the girls had told their experience at The Laurels—how cross Mrs. Morshead was and how sweet and placid Augusta; after they had reckoned up for the twentieth time the names and numbers of their expected guests at the picnic, and who was to bring what, they walked off to the billiard-room; Pater taking Pip and Jemmy joining with Gip. The girls were as fond of sport and games as their brothers and knew all the tricks with rod and gun and cue, with pistol, cards and dice, just as if they too had been born with the privilege of wearing knicker-bockers and into the inheritance of beards. They knew a few things more for which the world did not give them the credit

they deserved; as, for instance, how to embroider workhouse sheeting into extraordinarily showy dresses looking as if they had cost, as they would have said, a pot of money, but of which the mercantile value was only a few shillings. They could trim their hats so as to fill the souls of their companions with envious admiration, but the material was little better than rags and snippets; and they could make their own gowns with the help of fashion-books and here and there a pattern which they bought or borrowed, and which, being audacious and extreme, they always exaggerated beyond the line allowed by others. They were thoroughly handy girls, albeit of the tom-boy and audacious kind; though it must be confessed their work would not bear looking into and told best at a distance. But they kept all this industry, for which no one gave them credit, for the long winter evenings when the boys were away and no out-of-door amusements were to be had. In the summer they would have thought it a kind of high treason against the meaning of their existence had they pored over needlework instead of spreading themselves abroad in the garden and woods; and to "amuse the boys, poor old chaps," when they came home for their holidays from school, where they practised every virtue but that of sticking to their lessons, was the first duty in the Pennefather catalogue. Still, the Doves had the germs of domesticity in them; and, provided all the windows might be open night and day—in snow-time as in sunshine—provided they might jump into ice-cold water every morning and take a twelve mile walk, or its equivalent, every day—they would make good wives and managers enough. At all events, their homes would never be wanting in pleasantness nor amiability.

As soon as they got into the billiard-room, the mother and the other boys joined them; for they were always together when in the house; and the game went on with spirit. The four were fairly matched, and each made as good play as the other; and when any one made a miss or a fluke the whole family gave tongue at once and the uproar was simply deafening. Jack and Bob bet on Pip and Pater, Mater and Dick on Gip and Jem; and the interest was at its height, when the sound of wheels on the gravel, a loud ring at the bell and a sudden scuffling of feet and chorus of voices in the hall brought things to a stand-still. A moment after two well set-up young fellows came striding into the room, followed by the servants

all in grins, and half a dozen dogs leaping up and barking a welcome.

Down went the cues and all abroad were scattered the balls. Bets, spots, places and play were forgotten, as the whole Pennefather family converged to one point, and "Well, Val! Well, Mil!" was shouted by the eight in concert.

"Awfully glad to see you, boys," was Mr. Pennefather's welcome; "but you have stolen a march on us. We didn't expect you till half-past six."

"We took the express and got out at Lingston," said one of the young men; "and then drove over in a trap. It was better than knocking about that smoky old Manchester."

"So it was!" they all said together; and then they all laughed—as only the Pennefathers knew how.

"Early or late, you are always welcome!" said Mrs. Pennefather prettily; and the boys and girls endorsed her statement with a volley of: "Oh, it's awfully jolly to have you sooner than we expected;" and: "It was awful good fun that you thought of coming that way!"

To which the young men replied in the same strain: "Yes, it was awful good fun; and the drive was quite too jolly!" After this they all streamed out into the drawing-room, where they had afternoon tea and an "awfully jolly pile" of muffins, and were as happy as youth, good health and unbridled spirits could make them.

The two young fellows, who had come over in a dogcart from Lingston at the cost of another five-and-twenty shillings rather than knock about Manchester for a couple of hours, were of much the same kind and class as the Pennefathers themselves. Known individually at Sherrardine as Val and Mil—together as the Cowley boys—the world in general recognized them as Mr. Valentine and Mr. Milford Cowley, the only sons of Mr. and Mrs. Cowley, of Greyhurst Manor, Warwickshire. It recognized one of them too, as heir to a fine property and winked its wicked eyes when it discussed their intimacy with the Pennefathers. "Birds of a feather," it said-Mrs. Morshead, its spokeswoman; "but it was very convenient for genteel paupers like the Pennefathers to have about them birds with golden feathers like the young Mr. Cowleys; and no doubt those Miss Pennefathers would do their best to catch them. But if old Mr. and Mrs. Cowley did their duty they would put an end to the whole thing and take their sons out of danger. The Cowley boys, indeed!—Cowley fools if they did not see the schemes that were on foot, and victims if they gave in to them!"

This was Mrs. Morshead's verdict, representing the suspicious and censorious; but to no one at Sherrardine had the chance of Val or Mil falling seriously in love with Gip or Pip ever presented itself as yet—and if the thing had been suggested to them they would have extinguished it by peals of interminable laughter.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE REWARD OF SACRIFICE.

NATURALLY, the picnic to be given next Wednesday by the Pennefathers was the great theme of present conversation at Highwood. It was to be a very grand affair, as the neighbourhood counted grandeur; and curiosity was on tip-toe, together with hope and anticipation.

Miss Dawson, the milliner, was in high glee at the whole affair. She was making a supremely good thing out of it, for all the young ladies had something new for the occasion, and trade, which was generally so slack at the little town, was stirred up into a very consolatory spasm of briskness and vitality.

Every one in the place was asked, as well as a fair sprinkling of those not immediately bound up with the fortunes of Highwood. And among the rest Hortensia Lyon, with her

parents and Randolph Mackenzie, was invited: and no doubt was felt by the Pennefathers as to the glad acceptance of the four. But Hortensia, the pretty Puritan, was in the age when works of supererogation and acts of quite unnecessary self-sacrifice are more delightful than any other pleasures. Yearning for distinction, if not publicly in the eyes of men yet privately and to herself, she could not take things easily nor let herself go with the crowd. She must stand apart, and take up a moral pose that should single her out from the rest. She must sacrifice what would seem to be her natural inclination for the greater gain of her conscience; as now, in this matter of the picnic to Greenhill Falls.

When the note of invitation, written in Gip's big round sprawling hand, was brought to the family at Derwent Lodge, and Mr. Lyon, looking up from the chess-table where he was playing a bad game against his wife's worse, said kindly: "Good news for you, little maid!" and Mrs. Lyon, with motherly solicitude, added: "And you shall have that pretty new costume which Miss Dawson says she has just got from Paris—I dare say it only came from London—but it is the very thing for a picnic,"—Hortensia answered with pious primness:

"No; I shall not go. When Stella Branscombe is in such sorrow I do not think the Pennefathers should have given a picnic at all; and certainly I do not think that I ought to go to it."

"Oh, Hortensia, I say!" remonstrated Randolph.

"Stuff!" said Mr. Lyon good-humouredly.

"My dear!" said the mother; "you cannot refuse the invitation. It will look so odd if you, one of the young people of the place, refuse. You must go, Hortensia."

"No, mother; my conscience would not let

me," said Hortensia gravely.

"Stuff!" again repeated Mr. Lyon; "stuff and nonsense, child. Are you going to make yourself talked about all over the place?"

"I do not care for that if I am conscious

that I am doing my duty," said Hortensia.

"All right as a matter of sentiment, I admit, but the application does not fit," returned her father. "There is no dereliction of duty in going to a friendly picnic because poor Mrs. Branscombe died six weeks ago. You cannot live by the side of any grave, my child; not even by the side of your mother's, when that sad time comes-"-" Thank you, William!" said Mrs. Lyon with a displeased smile:—"Still

less are you able to indulge in this kind of enduring melancholy for one who was only the mother of your friend."

"While Stella is unhappy I will not go to balls and things!" said Hortensia, raising her pretty eyes with a sorrowful look.

"But Hortensia, I say!" remonstrated Randolph for the second time.

To his good, uncritical and believing soul, the self-sacrifice of his little cousin was heroic, saintly, divine; yet for all that his own grosser humanity was too strong to make that act of renunciation acceptable. He loved her for her sweet and noble intention; but he wanted it to stop there and not go on into deed.

"Oh, it is only one of her fads! The child will never be such a fool. She will think better of it when the time comes," said Mr. Lyon, turning back to his game. "Check, my dear. No, don't do that. If you cover with your bishop I shall simply take him and you will be no better off than before. And—no, you cannot do that either. I have told you twenty times, Cara, that you cannot castle out of check. You cannot get out of it; you are done for—check; check; check and mate. And now, my little maid, come here to me and let us make an end of this last bit of silliness."

"It is not silliness, father," said Hortensia gravely. "I am quite in earnest."

"And you do not see that you are casting a slur on others by your romantic self-sacrifice? You very good people never see that, it seems to me."

"I am casting no slur on any one, father."

"No? If it is right for you to abstain because Mrs. Branscombe died six weeks ago, then it is wrong for others to enjoy."

"It is right for me because I am Stella's special friend," said Hortensia, drawing her lips together.

"And your cousin, who is here only for a short time?" her father asked, with a merry glance at Randolph.

"Randolph will not mind," said Hortensia.

"Oh, but I do," said Randolph with energy.
"I mind very much indeed, Hortensia. It will be awfully slow without you or Stella Branscombe; and if you don't go I am sure I don't care to either."

"And what will people say if two old folks like your mother and me go to a thing of this kind, when our child, for whose sake only all these frivolous amusements should be undertaken, stays at home? Yet, it will be a pleasant day, and the outing will do your

mother good; and I shall not be sorry to go to Greenhill Falls once more. It is two years now since I was there. Besides, I like to see young people happy. But what will people say if we go and you do not, eh?"

"It does not much signify what they say," returned Hortensia, always in her character of the faithful witness. "If you do not dislike going, and do not think it wrong—" She let

her sentence finish itself in silence.

"But if I insist?" her father asked, with very make-believe sternness and very transparent severity.

She put her hand in his.

"You will not," she said with pretty solemnity.

"But I do, Hortensia; I do indeed," interposed her mother hastily. "I think it is all simply preposterous, and I insist on your going."

"No, mother, you will not force me to do

what I think wrong," said Hortensia.

"What exaggerated ideas you have, Hortensia!" said her mother a little hastily. "We shall be having you find out that it is wrong to laugh next. It is absurd altogether."

Of her own free will Mrs. Lyon would not have "played" her daughter as did her husband. Had she had the sole management of this exaltée little head her rule would have been more defined and her line considerably shorter.

"We cannot help that, Cara," said Mr. Lyon hastily to his wife, speaking with something like displeasure. "She must think as she likes; of course we have only to take care that she does not go too far in what she does."

It was a pity, certainly, but he always took his daughter's part against her mother. He never scolded her on his own side, even when he finally forbade any overt act of folly; and nothing annoyed him so much as his wife's interference and rebukes. The fact was, he allowed no one but himself to resist his little maid; and had Hortensia been sly, which she was not, she would have always managed so that her mother should have opposed her, sure that then her father would have consented.

Mrs. Lyon sighed impatiently.

"You spoil her!" she said.

After which she took up her knitting and kept an ostentatious and affronted silence.

"I should be sorry to make you unhappy, my little maid, but I should be sorry to put a slight on the kind-hearted Pennefathers, too," continued Mr. Lyon, satisfied now that he had the field to himself.

"It will not offend them because I do not go.

I am nobody. What matter can it make to any one whether I go or stay away?" said Hortensia with recalcitrant humility.

"It matters to us and your cousin," answered her father.

"If Randolph is going to take Orders, as I hope he will, he might be better employed than spending a whole day in idle gaiety. He ought to begin now to give up the world."

She spoke with the prettiest little air of puritanical primness conceivable; but it was a provoking little air, too, and once more roused her mother out of her safe entrenchment.

"You take too much on yourself, Hortensia," she said hastily and with undeniable good sense. "At your age it is very unbecoming to take this tone of setting all the world to rights and being better than your neighbours. I am sick of all this folly; and I must insist on it that you come to your senses and accept this invitation like any other rational person."

"No, no, Cara, we can scarcely do that," said Mr. Lyon. "The little maid must not be forced to do what she really thinks wrong. You see it is not anything very outrageous—not like making herself a Zenana missionary, or a hospital nurse, as was the craze a while ago—eh, lassie? But we cannot compel her

against her conscience. We can only persuade. You take her in hand, Randolph, and talk to her," he continued, turning to his nephew for whom he had so much affection as would willingly have made him his son. "Perhaps she will be guided by you. Young people at your age often understand each other better than we old ones can."

"I am sure I shall not be guided by Randolph if I am not by you and mother!" said Hortensia, with a refreshingly natural outburst of girlish scorn. "Randolph is not likely to influence me," she added, meaning that she had the loftier views and the wider intelligence, and that it was she who took his mind in tow not he who could steer hers.

"Well! see what you can do, Ran," said Mr. Lyon in the tone of one who is tired of a discussion; and the rest, taking the hint, dropped the subject.

But Hortensia was left so far mistress of the situation in that she had not been dislodged from her position, and still kept her resolve to sacrifice the day's pleasure to friendship and to stand out from the common herd as the one devoted and unselfish soul among the crowd of self-seekers—the one faithful Abra who could mourn with the mourners and sit in the dark-

ness with those whose sun had gone out, not only dance with those who piped and laugh with those who were glad.

Meanwhile nothing more was said at Derwent Lodge about the picnic, or who would or would not go. The invitation was accepted in general form; and Mr. Lyon believed in his power to make his little maid do as she ought when the day really came. But the mother, who knew the signs of the times better than he, enlightened as she was by the mysterious sympathies of sex, saw only too clearly that their tête montée enthusiast had determined to go her own way, and that nothing was farther from her thoughts than compliance with her parents' wish to make one of the guests at the Pennefathers' picnic.

"It is all William's fault," said Mrs. Lyon to herself. "He has spoiled the child so terribly there is no doing anything with her now. He will never let me interfere, and she can twist him round her little finger. If he would have given me my proper authority over her, things would have been very different."

And perhaps the poor dear woman was right; for without question Mr. Lyon had spoiled his little maid, though he did prevent her from doing anything irremediably absurd.

Sure enough when the day did come—and it was such a glorious day!—there was Hortensia in her black gown made with the ostentatious simplicity, the evident intention of mourning, which she had affected ever since Mrs. Branscombe's death. The delicate curves of her prim little mouth were drawn into so many straight lines; her sleek hair was taken off her face and bound round her head as smooth and tight as if it had been so much spun-silk wound by a machine round a wooden ball; her whole manner was instinct with that curious spirit of silent Puritanism which made her the voiceless preacher of Vanity and the nothingness of human pleasure.

"We shall have a beautiful day," observed Mr. Lyon, by way of opening the crusade.

"Beautiful!" echoed his wife, looking straight down her nose.

It was very naughty of her; she felt that it was; but really she was glad that William should be made to feel how foolish he was in spoiling the child as he did, and how much wiser it would be to give her, the mother, proper authority!

"How are we going?" asked Mr. Lyon, as if he had no doubts and no misgivings. "You and I in the victoria, Cara; and the two young

ones in the dogcart? You do not like the dogcart, I know."

"I am not going, father," said Hortensia simply.

She was not in the least degree excited. Was she not testifying?

"Oh, stuff—yes, you are!" he answered, still cheerful and positive. "Why, I thought we had done with all that nonsense, my little maid! Is it to come over again?"

"I cannot go, father—I would so much rather not!" she repeated, tears coming into her eyes; for she was really in earnest, though she was silly and over-conscious. "I have promised Stella to spend the day with her. She will feel so lonely, poor girl, to know that we are all enjoying ourselves, and she left out."

The blood came into Mr. Lyon's face in a flood, as it did when he was seriously annoyed. He loved his little maid—no father better; but he liked to have his own way too; he set store by his parental authority; and he had promised himself that he would make her yield in this matter.

"I think you would scarcely like to disobey me, Hortensia, if you knew how much you pained me," he said very gravely.

"I am so sorry, father," she answered; "but indeed it is against my conscience!"

"Your conscience should lead you to obey your father, Hortensia," said Mrs. Lyon unwisely.

"Now, Cara, leave her to me!" returned the father sharply. "She and I understand each other."

But if they did there was no outward and visible sign thereof, save such as could be found in Hortensia's red eyes and her father's artificial contentment when, after half an hour's private consultation in the study, both came back into the drawing-room with the air of people who have had a real quarrel and made only a half patched-up peace. However that might be, Mr. Lyon, heroically taking the burden on himself, announced that, as his little maid had such a strong objection, he would not force her to go; and while he spoke, Hortensia stood by with the oppressed kind of self-gratulation of a victor whose victory has cost her dear—but who after all is victor.

"You really do spoil her too much!" said Mrs. Lyon, with natural displeasure. "It is not kind to her, William, to give her her own way in this manner. She should be made to obey."

"You know nothing about the matter, Cara," answered her husband irritably. "If I say

that her reasons have convinced me that ought to be enough for you."

"She makes a downright slave of you," returned Hortensia's mother, even more irritably than the father had spoken. "And every year things get worse."

"I am master in my own house," said her husband with a peremptory air. "And it is time that we were starting."

All this time poor Randolph had not spoken a word, but he was in misery all the same. He would have given half his fortune to have escaped this picnic from which all the sweetness and sunshine had gone. How far pleasanter it would have been to have gone with Hortensia to Rose Hill, where he too might have hoped to cheer Stella Branscombe — Cyril Ponsonby's Star and his! But he knew that his best breeding and his highest duty lay in simply accepting the dry husks of what might have been such a rich feast of enjoyment; so, with a very sad face and very reproachful eyes, he mounted the cob that had been assigned to him, while Mr. and Mrs. Lyon went on in the victoria, and wrangled all the way. They were a very affectionate couple as times go in this naughty world; but they were terribly put out to-day, the one by Hortensia's obstinacy and the other by her victory—and they revenged on each other the annoyance for which she was to blame.

So this was where the little Puritan's exaggerated sense of right had led them all—to the ill-humour and discomfort of her father and mother; to the disappointment and gloomy boredom of poor unoffending Randolph Mackenzie; and to the temporary annoyance of half a dozen other people, and especially of the kind-hearted Pennefathers themselves, who "wanted the thing to go."

She gratified herself however, though she pained so many; and when she found herself at Stella's—thanked, praised, condoled with for her sacrifice and caressed with loving gratitude by her friend—she thought that she had the fairest slice of the day's great cake. Her slice was even larger when Mr. Branscombe sent for her to go into his studio, where he sat in his elegant grey velvet costume, with the band of white crape round his arm to mark his mourning for a saint.

"This is just such a thing as I should have expected from you!" he said, holding Hortensia's hand in his long, white, scented fingers: "the delicate act of a faithful soul perfumed with angelic sweetness."

Hortensia blushed and looked delightfully pretty. The praises of her own conscience were pleasant, but Mr. Branscombe's were intoxicating. There was a fine nebulous suggestiveness about them inexpressibly fascinating; and she was not of the age to criticise or to detect the difference between words without meaning and full of lofty sound, and those which had a definite idea and an intelligible thought.

Mr. Branscombe was her present ideal. He represented to her all that was most pure and poetic in man. She believed in his genius, in his loftiness of mind, in the touching sincerity of his love, in the noble simplicity of his lifedevoted as it was to Art, to Poetry, to Musicto all which makes humanity beautiful, noble and refined. And again she found herself wishing that her dear father were as delicate and æsthetic as Stella Branscombe's! If only he had been, what a proud and happy daughter she would have been! But she noticed that Stella looked pale and weary, and that she said almost eagerly: "It is such a beautiful day, papa, may I not take Hortensia into the garden?"

"And leave the Threnody unfinished?—That beautiful Threnody on your dear mother? It is

not half copied yet, I see," was the reply made with gentle reproach.

The girl sighed.

"I am not writing very well, to-day," she answered. "I have rather a headache; perhaps a little fresh air will do me good."

"Let us all go," said Mr. Branscombe, with a touching kind of dignity in his self-surrender. "My good little friend must not be saddened by too close contact with our grief. The fresh free sky for the fresh free heart—flowers for the young spirit—and the gay lilt of the glad birds for the gentle soul whose world is music. Yes, let us all go!"

"What a splendid man your father is!" whispered Hortensia with enthusiasm; and Stella lifting up her soft eyes full of love, answered:

"Yes, indeed, he is—splendid!" And yet she was sorry that he flattered her friend so very much! It was scarcely good for her!

"What happiness it must be to you to live with him in such an atmosphere of mind and beauty," continued Hortensia, her eyes glistening and her cheeks flushing. "All day long, music and poetry—all day long, these deep thoughts and noble words—and you privileged to help in the work of such grand genius—you

the first to read and hear! Oh, Stella, what a life!—how I envy you, my darling! how I wish it was mine!"

"It is indeed beautiful, and I am very much to be envied. There are few fathers like mine," answered Stella.

She spoke with perfect sincerity; and vet again she wondered, as she spoke, why she felt so tired of her enviable position and still more enviable work; and why she wished that she might be sometimes alone, when the privilege of her father's superior companionship was so great. She knew that his art was supreme and of the purest quality; but she was conscious of a very strong and very reprehensible yearning to be able to read something beside his poetry, to play more than his music, to look at other than his pictures. And oh! if he would but turn to indifferent themes and leave her dear dead mother's memory in sacred silence! If he would but leave off writing Threnodies and Odes, dirges and funeral nocturnes which, he said, it broke his heart to write and which she knew it broke hers to hear! There was something in this incessant commemoration that jarred on her, she did not know why; but with all her admiration for his genius it seemed a desecration rather than, as he said, the consecration of that blessed memory through the homage of his love and the glory of his genius.

All this however she kept to herself, and the day of the picnic was passed at Rose Hill in perfect peace and outward satisfaction; Mr. Branscombe alternately repeating his own poetry and weaving glittering webs of praise for Hortensia Lyon—Hortensia in the seventh heaven of gratified vanity and genuine enthusiasm—and Stella feeling as if her guard had been relieved, and that she was free to wander off into an independent dream-land of her own, wherein she might meet her own true love, and forget all the distance that lay between them and the sorrow that had overshadowed them.

CHAPTER XV.

THE TRYST AT CROSSING'S BRIDGE.

The Pennefathers were people who were notoriously lucky in all their undertakings, and whom Providence manifestly favoured. They invariably brought their undertakings to a successful issue, and when they gave picnics and garden-parties the very elements themselves conspired to make them go well. The national superstition about Queen's weather was transferred at Highwood to the family at Sherrardine; and halcyon days were certain when they launched their pleasure-boats. Of course it was just their luck to have such a glorious day as was this special Wednesday, when all the country-side, and some more into the bargain, were gathered at the trysting place, en route for Greenhill Falls.

[&]quot;Fine day as usual!" shouted one.

"Pennefather weather!" said another.

"By George! I wish I had your luck," said Colonel Moneypenny, who was a pessimist in philosophy and believed in his own persecution by fate.

"When I want to succeed in anything I will get the Miss Pennefathers to take a chance," said Dr. Quigley, who had come to see the cohort set out, but whose professional duties

prevented his joining in the fun.

He was a pleasant, well-liked and likely man of about forty; but though he paid compliments to every unmarried woman in the place and flirted in a mild way indiscriminately with all alike, no one had yet found the spell which should compel him to lav aside his bachelorhood —no one had yet dipped the net which should land him high and dry on the safe shores of matrimony. His freedom was the standing puzzle of the place and almost as many explanations were given of it as there are circumstances in human life; one bold guesser even suggesting a wife and family in the background, while another sketched out certain poor and disreputable relations who had to be kept out of his income if he did not wish to see them in the dock as thieves or in the Union as paupers.

Be that as it might, the cheery, likely and

well-liked bachelor doctor went on his own way, equally ready with a joke or a piece of gratuitous advice, half an hour's flirtation with a pretty girl or a night's watching over a sick boy; knowing all the family secrets for ten miles round and telling none of his own; more than once helping on a marriage that hung fire but keeping well out of the range for his own part; loving his profession but always talking of retiring; constitutionally fond of pleasure and given to all sorts of manly exercises, but never allowing his personal desires to stand between himself and the most irksome of his duties. He was a fine fellow all round; and, not even excepting Mr. Pennefather and Mr. Lyon, both of whom were general favourites in the place, he was, without doubt, the most popular man in Highwood.

As he stood now by the side of Colonel Moneypenny, with Sandro Kemp a little in advance, he made by no means the least noteworthy of a rather remarkable triad. All three men were tall; but, while Dr. Quigley was hard and muscular, like a man accustomed to an open air life, Sandro was softer in fibre though as powerful in build, and the Colonel was spare, wiry and without an ounce of superfluous flesh on his whole body. In face the doctor was grave, smiling, cheerful, with quick observant eyes and the look of one whose every sense is sharpened by incessant use; Sandro Kemp was grave, tender, reflective, seeing only certain things and seeing those only for certain purposes; while the Colonel had the harassed and discontented expression of a disappointed man too proud to complain but too sensitive not to resent.

His grievance was that he had been illtreated at the Horse Guards, and that his services had been passed over without the recognition which they deserved. Hence his very natural belief that England and the service were going at a hand-gallop to the deuce, and that nothing would save the nation but a strong reaction in favour of men of family, and the mob, with the plutocracy, sent to the rear. Sandro Kemp, for his part, thought that national salvation was to be found only in the possibility of every peasant's son rising to be Prime Minister if he had it in him; and Dr. Quigley had his panacea in medical supervision and scientific autocracy, by which no sickly man or woman should be allowed to marry; no unhealthy profession should be allowed to continue; and national rewards should be given to those who should lighten human

labour and minimize the chances of danger by inventions and machinery. Of the three the doctor was the most practical, the artist the most poetical, and the soldier the best bred. But it must be confessed, his was good breeding with a rent in the purple; being of the kind which respects condition more than persons, and does not think courtesy the right of the inferior, though it may be given at times by the grace of the superior. Hence he always held his head a little high when he was talking to Dr. Quigley or Sandro Kemp—the one a country practitioner for all that he was an M.D., and the other an impecunious artist for all that he might have genius and was of good family, not ranking in his mind as gentlemen equal with himself.

While they were standing there discussing the weather-chances of the day, Augusta Latrobe came up, holding her little son by the hand. How pretty she looked in her soft black dress, from which that generous powdering of jet beads, wherever they could be put, took all expression of sadness! In no wise coquettish, she was yet a woman with a wholesome respect for her own charms and the determination to make the best of herself, according to her age, should she live to be a hundred. She was never

dressed too youthfully nor dressed too much; but she was never other than well and becomingly attired—her gowns fitting to perfection—her hats and bonnets suiting her as if the fashion had been expressly made for her—her boots and gloves and all accessories without a flaw that even the most critical could discover.

In the midst of the light colours which flooded the "field" to-day, her graceful figure, all black and sparkle, looked by far the most elegant and distinguished. And though most of the girls were many years younger—in the first blush of their spring-time, while she was in the rich summer of thirty-two—still she was as beautiful as the prettiest of them all, and perhaps with a deeper meaning in her charm.

As soon as she came up she was surrounded by the Pennefathers, with whom she was an especial favourite.

"How jolly of you to come in such good time!" cried Georgie; "and how quite too awfully nice you look!" she added; for though the main happiness of the Doves lay in fun and dress combined, they were neither jealous of the success of others nor niggardly in their praises.

"I am sure you look very nice too," said Augusta, smiling. "What pretty dresses you have!"

"Think so?—so do I. Miss Dawson made them, for we had not time; but we designed them; and I think they have come out pretty well on the whole. Do you like our hats? We got the idea out of the fashion-book, but we had them made miles larger, not to be just like other people, you know. And, don't you see?—I've got pink in mine and Patrick has blue; but I'll let you into the secret—we are going to change them and our brooches after dinner, and we shall have such fun! Mind you don't let it out! No one knows but you and us two—even the boys and Mater don't. It will be good gear, I can tell you!"

"That is a new phrase, Georgie," said Augusta, laughing. "Everything is good gear, now."

"That's Jemmy's word," she answered. "You know one can't help catching the boys' slang. They never talk anything else. But you won't tell, will you?"

"No! no! certainly not!" she answered; and as at this moment the Lyons drove up with Randolph Mackenzie, the noisy, good-hearted givers of the feast surged up to them, and

Augusta was left standing near the three men, and nearest to Sandro.

It was no one's business to watch either Sandro or the Colonel; but Dr. Quigley made it his. Something in the face of each struck those quick observant eyes of his, and he looked from under the brim of his broad-leafed hat, first at one and then the other, and from them to the tranquil, graceful, comely widow.

A certain subdued eagerness, a certain halfbeseeching, half-tremulous admiration shone like the sorrowful light of a strong man's tears in Sandro's earnest eyes. The blood left his cheeks and his lips were pressed together as if the sight of this woman brought him joy and pain together—the joy that he must express, the pain that he could not conceal. The Colonel's thin, keen, furrowed face flushed like a girl's; yet his manner was stiff and dry, and he spoke almost as if he were displeased and scarcely on friendly terms with the widow of the Professor. He had had this manner ever since the day when Augusta Morshead had announced the fact of her intended marriage with Professor Latrobe; and her widowhood had not changed him. Before that day he had been the girl's most devoted cavalier; so much so indeed, that people had talked and speculated, as people will in country places where their neighbours' affairs are the most interesting things they have to discuss; but no one said anything now-though more than one had wondered "whether it would ever be on again with Colonel Moneypenny" when Augusta Latrobe came back, a penniless widow, with a child dependent on the questionable bounty of her hard-handed and bad-tempered old mother.

That speculation lasted only a very short time; and no one, save Dr. Quigley, saw that the Colonel cared more for Augusta Latrobe than he did for those Miss Pennefathers, whom he always called "Objectionable," or for Hortensia Lyon, whom he laughed at as a Précieuse Ridicule.

The pretty widow herself showed nothing. Certainly the faintest and most delicate pink tinge came over her whole face, like the far-off reflection of the Alpine after-glow as she turned to greet them all; and her eyes had a curious look of forced composure as they rested on each by turn, when she gave her hand and returned the conventional greetings proper to the occasion. But even Dr. Quigley's perceptions were at fault as to what that evanescent little flush might mean—and whether it meant anything at all or not; and if it did, for whom? and why?

The widow was too well-inured to self-suppression at that ungenial home where thorns and pitfalls abounded, to betray more of herself than she cared to show abroad; and among the many attractions of her character was this strange union of perfect sincerity with absolute self-control and as absolute reticence on all that she did not choose to make manifest. once said to Dr. Quigley—who, by the way, got more out of her than any one else was able to do—that she never remembered to have betraved by mere weakness and impulsiveness what she afterwards regretted to have told. If she told anything in confidence it was with the deliberate intention of bestowing that confidence; but she never let things slip from inability to hold them fast. And he believed her; as he was in the right to do.

Here again she held her own and baffled the friendly explorer who would have penetrated into the interior of her mind. Her manner to Sandro Kemp was exactly the same as her manner to Colonel Moneypenny; and when his own turn came, she gave him her hand and looked up into his face with her calm, clear untroubled eyes exactly as she had looked into the faces of the others; and the doctor saw no more for his part than the artist and the soldier had

seen for theirs. She was sweet, smiling, cordial, gracious; but with no special meaning or application. She gave no one an inch more of velvet than she gave to another; and she was velvet-soft to every one alike. Still, there was something under it all; and that something what was it?

By this time all had assembled; and now came the first act of the real drama—the order of their going and who should take whom —whereof this gathering at Crossing's Bridge was only the prologue. The Pennefathers were not people who patronized family exclusiveness on days of pleasure. To a husband any woman but his own wife; to a sister any man but her own brother. The cards had to be shuffled and fresh combinations made; and even staid old married folks, like Mr. and Mrs. Lyon, had to be dealt to other partners, with whom at least they could not spar and wrangle because a mother's influence had broken to pieces under a father's authority, and a father's authority had gone down before a daughter's desire.

The arrangements were not very difficult to Georgie and Pattie reserved for themselves, as a matter of course, Valentine and Milford Cowley; for which they got not a little

obloguy from those mothers and daughters who thought that the givers of a feast should be content with the crumbs, and that the sons of a wealthy landowner were dainties to be bestowed on the guests and not kept for the hosts. The four Pennefather boys, with Randolph Mackenzie and the other young men, were dispersed among the young ladies who were still on their promotion and unattached; but Freddy Grant and Louie Sturt, who were engaged, were sent off by themselves in a unity of bliss multiplied by two. Such of the elderly married folk as could not be paired with their kind were planted out where their chaperonage would be least obstructive; and then came the question of pretty Mrs. Latrobe and her escort, and who should have the honour of her safe guidance.

"You must go in our pony carriage with Colonel Moneypenny or Mr. Kemp," said Georgie and Pattie, the two speaking like one.

They were good-natured creatures, always ready to promote "cases," and to provide sheaths for "spoons" if hands were but kept off their own store. They were besides, honestly desirous to see Augusta well-married for the second time, and taken out of the cruel keeping of her mother.

"Which will you have?" they asked with generous intent.

As they wanted neither the artist nor the Colonel for their own share, they were quite willing that the widow should have her choice.

Sandro came forward with that hurried action which means desire, and the eager face which is substantially a prayer.

"I can drive Mrs. Latrobe," he said quietly as to tone and inflection; but his eyes were too earnest to be in harmony with his voice, and his hand visibly trembled as he thrust it into the bosom of his coat.

For a moment Colonel Moneypenny did not speak. Then he made a formal bow.

"If Mrs. Latrobe will trust herself to me, I shall be happy to be her escort," he said stiffly.

He could do no less than accept the challenge flung down by the twins; but he said no more than was absolutely necessary. Nevertheless, his pale, thin face flushed, as it had flushed before; and it seemed as if his heated blood would give him some difficulty to damp down.

Augusta looked smiling from one to the other; but over the heads of both, not frankly into their eyes. She seemed to accept the little comedy as it was presented to the public, and to enjoy the small tournament that had been arranged for her honour—she, set in the place of the Queen of Beauty whose office was to declare the victor and bestow on him her favour.

Slowly she brought her eyes down from the angle at which they were fixed, to a level with the men's faces. She looked full at Sandro; not with defiance, nor yet with coldness, only clearly, calmly, with odd resoluteness and decision behind which could be read a certain tender regret. Then she glanced hurriedly at Colonel Moneypenny, glancing askance, not looking straight into his face as she had looked into Sandro's.

"If Colonel Moneypenny will drive me?" she said in a clear voice and with a smooth smile.

Sandro turned away with undisguised disappointment. The Colonel's eyes flashed as if that troublesome fire were getting ahead of wisdom and making itself too evident for peace. But he did not speak. He only bowed again in his stiff, disagreeable, half-offended way, as he offered the widow his hand to assist her into the carriage, and noticed how pretty her feet were and how perfectly appointed she was altogether. Then he took his place by her side with the air of a man perfectly indifferent to his position and finding in it neither pleasure nor pain.

"I must take my child," said Augusta as the Colonel gathered up the reins and took the whip from the groom who had been holding the pony's head.

"Oh no!" said Georgie and Pattie. two young ones are going together with Mater

and nurse Mary."

"Oh no, indeed, you cannot have Tony! And I'm sure Colonel Moneypenny don't want him!" said Gip with a little laugh.

"I would rather take him," said Augusta

earnestly.

- "Drive on, Colonel," shouted Pip who was anxious to be off. "Mater and Mary have undertaken the nursery. We can't change things now. Good-bye; and take care of Frisky down hill. He has an ugly trick of falling over his own toes!"
- "Are we to go without your son?" asked the Colonel stiffly.

Augusta looked disturbed.

- "I would so much rather have had him with us," she said.
- "Shall I insist on his being brought?" he asked again, always glacial and angular.
- "By no means," said the two Doves authoritatively. "Drive on, do! You are keeping us all back."

The Colonel still held the whip pointed and the reins loose. He looked at the widow, as if for her final decision.

"Perhaps I had better not disturb the arrangements," she said with evident reluctance; and the Colonel, giving the signal, went off at a fast trot, finding it a little difficult to keep up his air of glacial and offended dignity and not to say frankly: "I am glad that I am to have you all to myself!"

But Colonel Moneypenny was nothing if not conscious of what was due to himself: and it was due to himself, according to his own ideas of things, that he should make Augusta Latrobe practically petition to be reinstated in his good graces—practically confess that she had done very wrong in marrying Professor Latrobe, and not waiting humbly in faith and patience for the hour when he himself should have asked her to be his wife. And to do this he must keep her at the arm's length where he had held her ever since the day of her engagement, and not let her think that she had only to smile to bring him to her feet again. Wherefore the drive, which cost poor Sandro Kemp so much pain, was the dullest, driest and most uninteresting of all in the day, so far as words and looks were concerned. Secretly, in his heart, the Colonel

was profoundly content in spite of his angular outside; while Augusta more than once thought: "Would it do? Should I gain, both for myself and the child? or should I only exchange tyrannies and get no good from either?"

Meanwhile poor Sandro did his best to blow his little bubbles in that part of this frothy sea of so-called pleasure where he found himself; but taking a turn at the crank or a walk on the treadmill would have been almost as amusing as laughing at jokes which had no point, and flirting with girls for whom he had no inclination. The sun had gone out of the sky for him; and he thought that picnics and all kinds of open-air amusements were simply inventions of the Evil One—the most stupid, insane, disappointing, inartistic things that could possibly be devised for the torment of humanity. He was angry with fate, Augusta Latrobe, the Pennefathers, the sunshine and Colonel Moneypenny—all in about equal proportion. yet, why should he make himself uncomfortable because the Colonel was driving Mrs. Latrobe in the pony carriage, and he was with Jack Pennefather and the two pretty Miss Rayners in a phaeton? What was Mrs. Latrobe to him? What could she be indeed? She was perfectly right not to give him false hopes, and

she had full liberty to encourage any one else. He could not marry; and the Colonel was a wealthy man and could. Yes; she was perfectly right; and he was a fool to care about the matter. And those two pretty cousins—the Misses Rayner from London—were really remarkably picturesque-looking girls, and their heads would come in splendidly for the sketch which he had promised to do of the whole group.

Nevertheless, for all their prettiness, he found the drive to Greenhill Falls the longest, flattest and dullest that he had ever taken; and not even his artist's eyes could see the full beauty of the points by which they skirted, for that tugging at his heart-strings—that sense of emptiness and dreariness—which made the whole earth barren outside the limits of one sweet and gracious presence.

"It is madness!" he said to himself; "it is slavery unworthy of a rational man!"

All the same, he hugged his chains and cherished his delusions, and made such spasmodic attempts at bubble-blowing that the two girls saw through the effort and resented his preoccupation as an affront to their charms.

"The most stupid man I ever saw!" said each when the drive came to an end; while Jack Pennefather added as his contribution:

"Old Kemp was never much of a good thing; but to-day he was duller than old boots and as heavy on hand as so much lead. He wasn't worth his salt or the horseflesh it cost to tool him over, and I should have liked to have dropped him over the side. We should have been far jollier without him."

So they would—poor, sad-hearted and uncomfortable Sandro, for whom the sun had gone out of the sky and the earth had suddenly become barren because Augusta Latrobe was sitting by the side of Colonel Moneypenny in the pony carriage, and he was half a mile in the rear with the two Misses Rayner from London and that idiotic young Jack Pennefather.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE POCKETFUL OF FUN.

WHETHER long or short to the minds of the wayfarers the drive to Greenhill Falls came at last to an end. There were no adventures by the way and not the faintest approach to an accident. Frisky stumbled once in going down-hill, according to his habit; but the Colonel pulled him up in time, and gave him a savage cut with his whip which was less for the beast's correction than the man's ill-humour. The children were good and neither wanted to commit suicide by climbing about the seats, nor demanded impossibilities in the way of food and One by one the carriages drove amusement. up to the camping-ground; and the inmates were greeted as vociferously as if they had not been seen for a twelvemonth, and had come safely over the pass of the Tête Noire at least.

To see all those bright faces, to hear all those pleasant voices, one would have thought that no sorrow existed on the earth to sadden the sons and daughters of men, and that the days of that long looked-for Utopia had at last set in.

What a noisy, joyous little company they made! and what fun it all was! While the cloth was being laid that fun was at its height. The unpacking of the baskets was a succession of surprises, each more delightful than the other. The shouts of admiration for the Colonel's generous supply of champagne, and for Augusta Latrobe's gooseberries and hot-house grapes; for the terrible old woman was either too human at bottom, or too proud to let her daughter go empty-handed to the feast; the enthusiasm excited by the Misses Rayner's superb pâté de foie gras, sent as their contribution by the parents Rayner in London; the laughter raised by the multiplicity of screws of salt and cones of sugar; the prospective enjoyment contained in the quarters of lamb and sirloins of beef, the chicken and veal-pies, the salads with lobster and the salads without in the bottles of custard, of cream, of milk, of lemonade—in the tarts and cheesecakes, the jellies and big plum-cakes; the delightful occupation of gathering sticks and boiling the water

in a kettle that would not hang over a fire that would not burn; the mess made in breaking the eggs for an omelette, and the queer compound which went under that name when all was done; the fights with earwigs and "harvest-men," wasps and beetles which went on without intermission; and then the uncomfortable seats found on tree-roots and jutting stones, with ants crawling up from the ground and green caterpillars dropping down from the trees;—oh, the fun of it all! What was there to compare with a picnic? thought all the young people in a body; and what plague, equal in horror, had ever been invented by madmen for the torture of innocent human beings? thought the Colonel, who hated to be disturbed in his habits and who was not specially affected to the But he was in for it now and Pennefathers. had to make the best of it, pretending the enjoyment, which he was far from finding, in eating his own dinner by snatches while he supplied the ladies without delay and disputed with creeping things the best morsels on his plate.

Gip and Pip were completely in their element, and outdid themselves in noise, goodnature and slang. The boys were ubiquitous; and it seemed to each guest as if he or she

were asked four times over by the same person whether he or she would not have more of this or some of that?—going through all the dishes on the cloth. Val and Mil Cowley kept close to the skirts of Gip and Pip, and behaved rather shabbily to every one else; but though the twins flirted generously with them they flirted generously with every other man about the place, and no one could complain that he was left out in the cold. Sandro Kemp, partly prudent, partly heart-sore, kept rigorously away from Augusta Latrobe for the first half-hour of the time; but after then his prudence came to an end, his heart-strings tugged too hard, and, almost without knowing how, he found himself by the fair widow's side, looking into her face for some sign of love with eyes which betrayed his own.

But when Augusta had made up her mind and marked out her course she kept to it; and not the keenest observer—not even Dr. Quigley had he been there—could have detected the faintest, most shadowy sign of that which poor Sandro was yearning, longing, hoping to see. Yet, that she should speak to any other man than himself with frankness and gracious sweetness annoyed the susceptibilities of the pepperytempered Colonel. During that tête-à-tête drive

to the Falls he had thawed to an immense extent internally, though externally his manners had remained just as glacial as ever; but he knew in his own breast that the old charm had begun to work again, and that Augusta Latrobe was almost as beautiful to him, and almost as desirable, as Augusta Morshead had been. He intended however to prove her thoroughly before committing himself irrevocably. That is, he intended to repeat the mistake of the past by which he had lost her once already. If, during this period of proof, he saw any symptoms of leaning to this side or that—any signs of possible favouring one or another—he would banish her from his thoughts, leave her to her fate, and close for ever against her that golden door through which, if she were wise and good, she might pass into the happiness of his home, the sufficiency of his fortune, and the honour lying in the name and state of Mrs. Colonel Moneypenny.

He had no suspicion of any one. Since her widowhood and return to the old home Mrs. Latrobe had lived with such supreme discretion that she had escaped even the miscroscopic research and the megaphonic talk of a small country place like Highwood; and no one had coupled her name with that of any desirable

bachelor here or elsewhere. Sharpened as his eyes were by suspicion and distrust, watching keenly and eagerly as he did, he yet could not see anything in her manner to Sandro Kemp which should cause him a moment's uneasiness. Certainly, he did not like that fellow's following her up as he did, as he had not liked the choice and juxtaposition of the start; and for a word or look the jealousy, inseparable from that damped-down fire in his heart, would have blazed out heaven-high. But Sandro's back was turned to him at this moment, and the widow's calm face and quiet air betrayed nothing. So the rupture which was threatened for just one brief instant was happily got over, and the Colonel signified his silent forgiveness of a problematical sin by going up to the two as they sat a few feet apart under the trees, and making the third in their conversation.

When the dinner was quite over and the servants' turn had come, the company all paired off and strolled away to the ostensible object of the day—the Falls, which were about a mile distant. Gip, with the keen "flair" of her kind, saw how things stood with poor Sandro Kemp; and, sympathetically inclined to give all "cases" a helping hand when she could, she determined to put a spoke in that old

Colonel's wheel, as she irreverently phrased it, and to give poor old Kemp a chance. Just as they were all gathering themselves into little knots, or segregating themselves into pairs, she, standing with Val Cowley and Jessie Rayner—of whom, by the way, she wanted to get rid on her own account—called to Colonel Moneypenny just as he had ranged himself on Augusta's right hand, Sandro Kemp being on her left.

"Oh, Colonel Moneypenny!" she said; "do come here and tell us the name of this awfully funny little flower! I know that you are a tremendously good botanist, and Jessie Rayner is wild about botany. Do come, please; we are so awfully anxious to know."

"I assure you, Miss Pennefather, I know very little indeed about flowers," said the Colonel crossly, and not quitting his post. "Mr. Kemp is a far better botanist than I. Ask him."

"My knowledge is exceedingly superficial. I am afraid I should be of no use to any one," said Sandro quickly. "I yield the palm to you willingly," he added, turning to the Colonel with a smile.

"It would be absurd in me to pretend to know anything about it," said the Colonel angrily. Surely never were two men in greater haste to proclaim their ignorance of a science wherein both were notoriously proficient!

Gip laughed till the echoes rang with her voice.

"How awfully funny!" she said, looking at the Colonel through and through. "Only last week you told me that you had made a collection of all the flowers to be found about Highwood, and that you found there were some awful lot—I forget no how many—a thousand or a million, or something. Come along and don't be ill-natured!" she added familiarly. "What a character the Highwoodites will get if you won't do a little kindness like this! What will Jessie Rayner say of you, I wonder?"

"Oh, don't bring me in, Georgie!" said Miss Rayner hastily. She too had seen a little into the meaning of things; and for a pretty girl from London, fashionably dressed by Madame Elise and used to homage, it was too humiliating to be twice slighted on the same day and to have two men preferring a woman ever so much older than, and not so pretty as, herself. "I should be very sorry if either Colonel Moneypenny or Mr. Kemp gave himself any trouble on my account," she added stiffly. "I can find out the flower by myself."

"If I can be of any use to you I am sure I shall be most happy," said the Colonel, stung into gallantry, and going up to those two tiresome girls behind whom Valentine Cowley was standing, waiting for his turn and sure of Georgie's tact.

"Shall we go on?" asked Sandro of Augusta, his heart beating fast and his voice a trifle husky and unsteady.

For just one short moment the widow hesitated, thinking rapidly —what was the wisest thing to do? Should she escape from the danger of that uninterrupted companionship by joining the group of unwilling botanists? or should she trust to herself and go with Sandro alone? To do this would anger the Colonel, but to go up to him and wait for him would have the look of running after him—would be compromising herself both openly to the others and privately to himself.

She knew that she could, if she would, win that trick in the great game of matrimony. It was not for nothing that she held her passions, her weaknesses, her desires so well in hand to give the lead to her reason and perceptions. She saw through the glacial surface down to the smothered fire beneath, and knew that it depended only on herself which should gain on the other. But she had not finally determined. Life at her mother's home was emphatically torture; would it be much better at the Colonel's? No; she had certainly not finally determined; and in view of all that was and might be—of her own indecision in some things if resolute determination in others—she quietly accepted Sandro's proposition and said:

"Yes, let us go on. They will soon overtake us."

"I hope not," said the artist.

And Augusta wisely did not hear.

She was right, however. In a very short time, and before Sandro could tell her about the good things which had come to him, the Colonel and pretty Jessie Rayner joined them as they were crossing the meadow-all four walking abreast - Sandro Kemp and Miss Rayner on the outside, by which the Colonel was next to Augusta in the middle. arrangement answered very well so long as they could walk in open order over the lately mown grass; but when they came to the narrow pathway through the boggy waste, where only one could go at a time and where the ladies had to be helped over the stones and what the Pennefathers called the squashy places, then the efforts which each made to out-manœuvre the other were marvels of generalship.

The victory rested with the artist and the Colonel was out-generalled. It was Sandro who helped the pretty widow over all the bad bits;—Sandro who held her hand when she crossed the rude stepping-stones or jumped the narrow brook;—Sandro who took her as his own care by right of assignment and appropriation, while the Colonel was left to fatigue-duty and Jessie Rayner. It was a voiceless, weaponless duel, but it was a duel all the same; and from that day Sandro Kemp might count as one of the facts of his life, the deep and passionate enmity of Colonel Grey Moneypenny.

This was the only hitch in the day's enjoyment, and when they all gathered in a body at the foot of the hills, the noise and fun and laughter broke out afresh, all the more sweeping and intense because of the interval of comparative repose gained through the scattering of the elements.

Gip and Pip changed their hats and their name-brooches, and no one knew one from the other. Val Cowley, who had been making confidences to Gip, repeated his lesson to Pip, to that naughty hussy's supreme satisfaction; and Mil, who had just told Pip that he thought her the jolliest girl in the world, said the same thing to Gip and entreated her to give him

back the phrase with interest. Mr. Lyon continued with one sister the conversation he had begun with the other; Jessie Rayner complained to Pattie of the false position in which she had placed her by forcing her on Colonel Moneypenny; the boys themselves were taken in; the father and mother were puzzled; only Augusta, who was in the secret, and little Nora, who had landmarks of her own, saw through the joke and wondered in what the fun con-That there was some tremendous joke sisted. in the mystification was evident, but to no one but themselves and the boys, when they were told, was it in any way intelligible. however, laughed as if they would never leave off; and when they were told the Cowley boys laughed too, but not quite so heartily as the Pennefathers.

The only one of the young men who was not thoroughly amused was Randolph Mackenzie, though he had sense enough not to betray his dulness. The general gaiety was so far infectious in that he found himself compelled to laugh when others laughed; to flirt with Gip and Pip when flirting was evidently expected of him; to make his towering height of six feet two, with bulk in proportion, as ubiquitous as if he had been a smaller man; and to do all

that was expected of a good-looking young fellow in an assembly where, as the Doves had said, there was not a stick of a girl nor a crab of a man, and where, if the fun was of the most innocent and harmless kind possible, it was also of the noisiest and most rollicking.

But in spite of that superficial infection, his honest heart turned ever back to his little cousin who had sacrificed herself so nobly tohis idea of duty—but what a will that quiet. little creature had!—and to that dear beautiful noble-hearted Stella-Cyril's Star; and because Cyril's then his as well—who had given up her love for her duty, and who was so sad and pale, so patient and unhappy! What odd things women are! he thought as he stood a little apart from the rest looking at the tumbling waters and seeing nothing of those falling sheets of foam, those rising veils of spray. They had a moral code among themselves which man did not share nor yet understand. It was doubtless far higher and purer than what he had on his own side, but it was incomprehensible all the same.

Randolph Mackenzie was one of those youngmen to whom a good girl is a thing to be wondered at, a little feared and very much respected. She was something precious and

mysterious; something removed from the full comprehension of men because standing on an infinitely higher platform. Her very ignorance of the evils into the knowledge of which even little lads at school are initiated, gave him a curious sense of awe. When with such girls as his cousin and Stella Branscombe, he felt as if standing in some holy place, in the presence of some sacred shrine where no sinful thing might be. It was as if he had to put off part of himself when with them; to be pure and humble, reverent and careful, as they also were pure and noble. It was a great mystery, this virtuous and innocent girlhood!-and while he thought this the loud laughter of wild Georgie Pennefather rang in his ear as she clambered up the rock in front of him and shrieked out to Milford Cowley: "Where's Georgie, Mil? I wish you would fetch her and Val; or stay -do you go, Randolph. Tell George and Val we want them up here."

The final act of the merry drama was set when Sandro Kemp was reminded of his promise to "make a picture" of the party. Naturally each girl wanted to be the most conspicuous of the group, and all lamented that Sandro was not a photographer, when it would have been so much easier to have posed and

the result would have been so much more like. Sandro, however, put Augusta as the "point de mire." He said he wanted her black dress in the composition;—and when an artist says that he wants something for his picture it is useless to discuss or dissent. He placed them all just as he would have them; and resisted the temptation to caricature Colonel Moneypenny. This was his day's sacrifice to a higher principle—the suppression of self by the generosity of pride.

But the Colonel, annoyed on all sides as he had been, resented the picture-making as if it had been an intentional personal affront. It was the last drop in the cup—the last straw of the pack. He was horribly ill-tempered all the way home, and Frisky had a bad time of it. He was not certain whether he ought or ought not to be jealous of Sandro Kemp—a man whom he called "that artist fellow," and held as neither his equal nor yet a real gentleman. If he ought, then all was over between him and the fair-faced widow; if he had no cause, why then he might see about it.

He was full of these dumb weighings and balancings, full too of pinpricks and uncomfortable places; and he made the drive as he was himself. He relented however, just as he neared the gate of The Laurels, that formidable home where, if he did not know all, he guessed something of what the poor dependent daughter suffered. When he parted from her at her own door, he pressed her hand a little more tenderly than he had intended, and looked into her face with a decided softening of his Pinched and furrowed that keen and haughty face always must be; but it could be as gentle as it was sometimes haughty, as soft as it was sometimes stern. It was gentle and soft enough now, as he looked right into Augusta's eves while he held her hand warmly clasped and said below his breath: "God bless vou."

Then the door opened and shut, and the young widow passed from the love and gaiety and pleasantness of the outer world into the darkness of the prison called by courtesy her home—that home where she was Cinderella among the ashes whom the fairy godmother had forgotten.

She had one joy however, in her happy little son, who, having preceded her by half an hour or so, came running into her arms as she crossed the hall, saying:

"Oh, mamma, what a jolly day it has been!" This was the latest addition made to his

vocabulary. It was a present bestowed on him by little Nora, and the earnest of future chidings and more than one slapped little hand as a reminder that "jolly" was a word not to be used at The Laurels, and that as often as he used it his grandmamma would "spat" him.

Hortensia was at home when her parents and Randolph arrived. She had had a day after her own heart, and received them all with the sweet serenity of one whose conscience is clear and who has done the right thing. They had sacrificed to Baal in the person of the Pennefathers, and she had carried incense to the altar in the person of Mr. Branscombe. She would not reproach them; only, she did feel very much their moral superior as she met them at the door and asked them if they had enjoyed themselves? remarked that it had been a very fine day; and said she was so glad to see them safe again at home!

She kissed her father and mother and smiled quietly at her cousin; helped her father to take off his stone-coloured alpaca dust-coat; asked her mother if she should carry her bonnet upstairs and bring down her cap, to save her the fatigue of mounting those low, broad steps?—and stood on a pinnacle of righteousness and in the consciousness of victory all round. She

had been the sweet and spiritual Mary—now she was the quiet, homestaying, helpful, able Martha; and they were pleasure-seekers of a rowdy and objectionable kind. And she meant that they should take the lesson to heart and see things as she saw them.

Then the night stole on and the day came to an end for all alike; and of the Pennefathers' famous picnic nothing was left but empty bottles and fragments of food, torn gloves, soiled gowns, a few dreams and some regrets.

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